

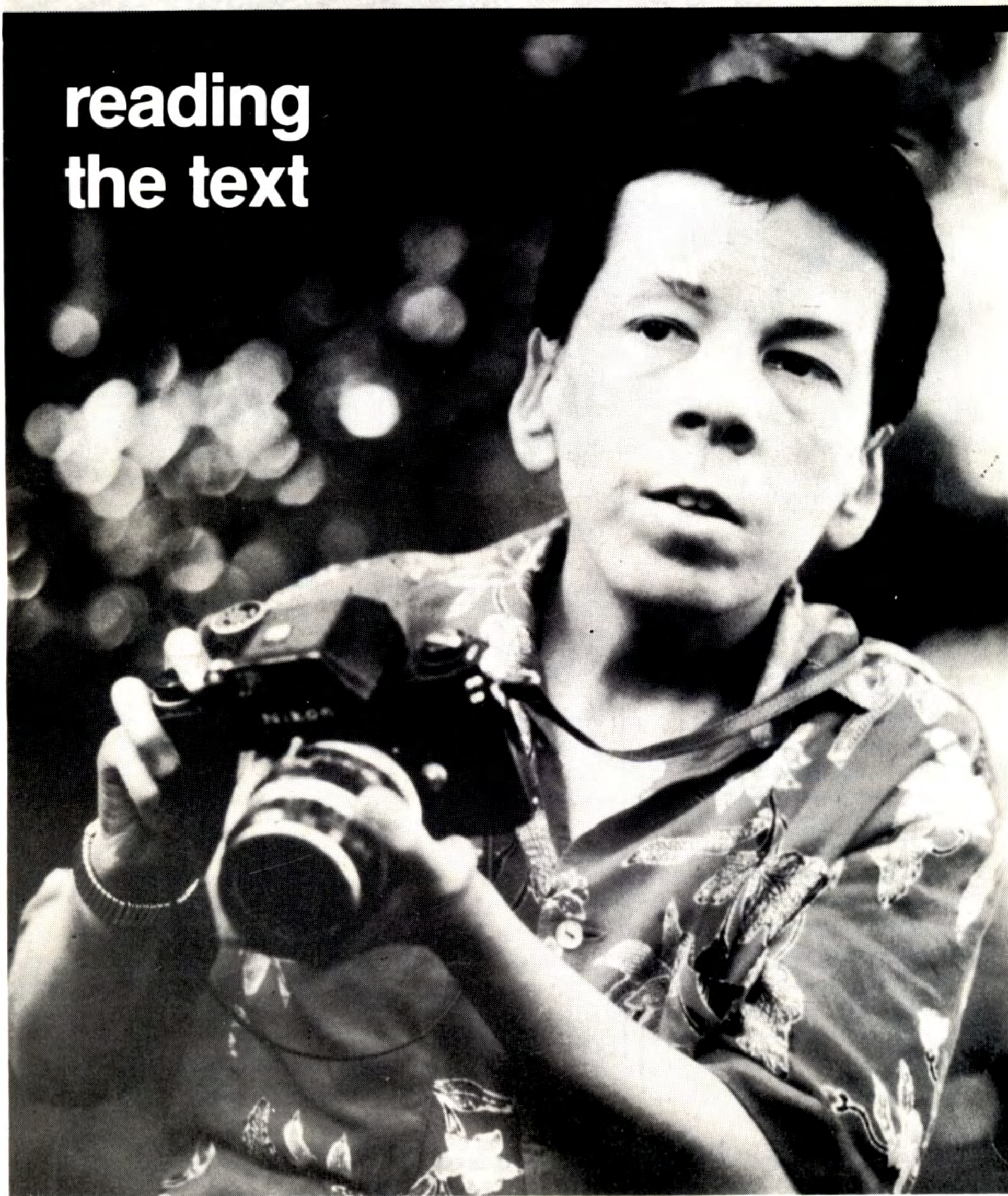
# cineACTION!

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Double Issue  
Nos. 3/4

A MAGAZINE OF RADICAL FILM CRITICISM & THEORY

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reading  
the text





# CineAction!

## Double Issue

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# Contents

Editorial ROBIN WOOD	Page 1
In Defense of Criticism ANDREW BRITTON	Page 3
Notes for a Reading of <i>I Walked With A Zombie</i> ROBIN WOOD	Page 6
Feminist Film Theory and Social Reality FLORENCE JACOBOWITZ	Page 21
<i>Cries and Whispers</i> Reconsidered VARDA BURSTYN	Page 32
Gender and Destiny: George Cukor's <i>A Star Is Born</i> RICHARD LIPPE	Page 46
The Other Dream: <i>The Year of Living Dangerously</i> LORI SPRING	Page 58
Hitchcock's <i>Spellbound</i> : Text and Counter-Text ANDREW BRITTON	Page 72
Inventing Paradox: <i>Celine and Julie Go Boating</i> JANINE MARCHESSAULT	Page 84
Capital at Play: Form in Popular Film SCOTT FORSYTH	Page 91
Neglected Film of the '80s: <i>Foxes</i> BRYAN BRUCE	Page 98
A Brief Critique of Pop Criticism BRYAN BRUCE	Page 103

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Front cover: Linda Hunt in *The Year of Living Dangerously*.





John Travolta in De Palma's *Blow Out*.

## editorial

IT IS ALMOST 25 YEARS since *Movie* introduced the practice of close reading (derived from a movement in literary criticism) into English-language film criticism. Much has intervened since (semiotics, structuralism, the appropriation of psychoanalytic theory), and the activity of close analysis has been partly transformed, partly abandoned. The structuralist tradition has given us (in Roland Barthes' *S/Z*, in Stephen Heath's massive examination of

*Touch of Evil*, in the work of Raymond Bellour) close readings that are in some respects 'closer' than anything even dreamed of in the early days of *Movie*: more precise, more detailed, more rigorous, more 'scientific'—products, one might say, not only of a critical movement but of the age of the moviola (and now the VCR). Yet, exemplary as these are in certain ways, they leave some of us unsatisfied and, to a degree, sceptical of the claims made for them. The development of



a 'scientific' approach was absolutely necessary within a certain phase of the wider development of aesthetics: one had to see how far it could be pushed, how much (and what kind of things) it would reveal, what would prove to be its limits. Many of us (not only among the *CineAction!* collective) now feel that this point has been reached (we may of course be proven wrong). In any case, the texts in question were very few—a mere handful. The structuralist tradition is primarily characterized by its proliferation of 'theory,' which has become ever more abstruse and academic; many feel that, with the advent of 'deconstruction,' it has reached its (dead) end, or at least an impasse.

The kinds of close reading undertaken in the original *Movie* of the '60s seem to me to manifest various shortcomings, very much of their time. There was, first, the evasive attitude to evaluation: the general assumption (from which I must exclude myself) was that the business of interpretation was to describe as accurately as possible, leaving value-judgements 'democratically' to the reader (a myth, of course: every description implies evaluation, however surreptitiously). But there was also grave doubt (in which I must include myself) as to the basis on which evaluations could validly be made; to put this another way, the early *Movie* had no explicit political commitment (and rather prided itself on the fact). These hiatuses were remedied in the post-1968 *Movie* (in my opinion very impressively, especially in the work of Andrew Britton and Richard Dyer, which thoroughly transformed the tone, tendency and function of the magazine); but *Movie* since the early '70s has been beset by increasing difficulties and now appears only intermittently.

I (it is necessary that I use the first person singular, as I am not certain that I speak for an entire collective that is anything but monolithic) see *CineAction!* as developing the critical tradition I have described in *Movie*: hence the decision to devote almost an entire double issue to close readings of films. What crucially distinguishes this enterprise from the original *Movie* is our politicization. Our specific interests vary widely, as do the specifics of our political commitments. Yet we all share certain basic beliefs that unify us as a group: that the dominant movement of our culture must be

opposed in every field and on every level, if our civilisation (and perhaps the human race) is to survive; that any hope for the future lies in the development of leftist positions, especially the multiple forms of feminism and Marxism/socialism; that, in the present cultural climate, any criticism that is not political is irrelevant.

At the same time (and here I believe I speak for all of us), I would wish to dissociate *CineAction!* from the trap of any simplistic notions of, or attitudes to, the ideologically 'correct.' Films are products of a cultural situation and dramatize (with widely varying degrees of awareness and intelligence) the conflicts and tensions within that situation. To 'read' a 'text,' then, is to attempt to sort out the various, perhaps contradictory, impulses, influences, determinants, that have contributed to its construction. The richness of a work of art, and the kinds of illumination and pleasure we derive from it, may lie as much in its internal tensions, its confusions, in what it tells us inadvertently (perhaps while meaning to say the opposite), as in any extractable unambiguous 'statement.' A film like *The Deer Hunter* (which has been widely perceived as a 'right wing' movie) seems to me of far greater value than many works offering 'messages' that I might regard as politically 'correct.' An undertaking to 'read the text' involves an openness to the range and complexity of meanings by which a text of any distinction is likely to be structured.

**Robin Wood**



# In Defense of Criticism

by Andrew Britton

IT IS NOWADAYS THE case, perhaps, that the word 'criticism' tends to sound *recherché*—to suggest nostalgia for the days before film studies became intellectually strenuous. A few years ago it passed as a commonplace in advanced circles that criticism ought to be, and might become, 'scientific,' and the older word evoked in itself the morass of impressionism and empiricism from which the discussion of art should be promptly rescued. Today, a new set of discourses adjure us not to criticise, but to 'deconstruct'—and deconstruction, whether or not it is properly scientific, certainly suggests an activity at once more bracing and more precise than any in which the student of culture traditionally engaged. The new vocabularies are awesome—at any rate, they have attracted a good deal of publicity: and it is correspondingly necessary, if one thinks the concept of criticism worth reviving, to undertake to be as clear as possible about the intention with which one employs it.

No film theory is worth anything which does not stay close to the concrete and which does not strive continually to check its own assumptions and procedures in relation to producible texts. Much of what has passed for film theory in the last decade is principally remarkable for its solipsistic and opportunistic character, and it is curious that discourses which arraign 'representation' and 'realism' on the ground that they serve in essence to naturalise a bourgeois world-view should be committed also to methods of analysis which are programmed to produce exactly the conclusions which the reader is presumed to hold in the first place. The interests of film

theory are not served by finding in every 'realist' text a confirmation of the Lacanian (or Foucaultian, or Derridean—or whatever) 'problematic,' or by proselytising for the mass-production of 'modernist' texts which flatter the presuppositions embodied in the attack on realism. Characteristically, and deplorably, such theory reduces the objects it purports to theorise to mere pretexts for rationalising the validity of its own premises, and makes a virtue of its refusal of all cognitive controls by denouncing any concern for the material integrity of the text as 'empiricism.'

All intellectual fashions have their slogan, and the proposition that 'theory constructs its objects,' seductive and comforting as it is, is now part of the thinking literary person's common sense. This proposition, when it is not a truism, is little more than a self-serving scholastic fiction and a licence for intellectual irresponsibility, and that conception of theory is illegitimate in which the necessarily creative and formative nature of discourse is understood as a means of freeing the theory in question from the elementary critical obligation of demonstrating its own pertinence. Such theory is anti-theoretical, and a betrayal of the function of criticism.

It is also possible to regret the abusive, trivialising misappropriation of political—in particular, of marxist and feminist—idioms for which structuralist and post-structuralist film theory have been responsible, and of which the banalisation of the word 'materialist' (as in 'materialist film practice') is representative. The effect in general of this usage, whatever the intentions of specific users (often, doubtless, 'good'), has been to give a spurious political gloss to discourses which

are in fact innocent of all politics: and as a result the language of socialism has been conscripted for service in the realm of manners and polite good form. It has been reduced, in fact, to a sign—a sign that one is familiar with the forms and keepings of a fashionable academic world in which such idioms are common currency but which issues, nevertheless, into that public world where the major struggles of our time are being fought out.

It is in the nature of fashions to change. Ten years ago, before the ripples of 1968 had subsided, it was necessary for advocates of the Lacanian theory of subjectivity to qualify the phrase with the adjective 'materialist'—for at that stage one was committed, if one was committed at all, to the project of articulating psychoanalysis with historical materialism. A few years later, when the irreducible economism and class-reductionism of Marx's thought had become clearer and historical materialism had been superseded by Foucault's theory of Power, the adjective was superfluous, even embarrassing. Had it not been discovered that Marx was befuddled by the most vulgar realist epistemology, and had not Foucault asserted that marxism led to the Gulag archipelago? Clearly, materialism would have to go.

Politics, in film studies, ought to be more than a matter of esoteric vocabularies that are useful while they happen to be 'in' but which can be discarded as soon as they happen to go 'out.' Marxism is a politics—not just another academic hermeneutic.

It is now, and has for some time been, apparent that the claims once made for the significance and intelligibility of the successive structuralisms as 'critical theory' were exorbi-



tant. Amongst other tests, Sebastiano Timpanaro's *On Materialism*, the volumes from the Harvester Press on *Issues in Marxist Philosophy*, Fredric Jameson's *The Prison-House of Language*, the polemics against Althusser by Simon Clarke and Edward Thompson and Perry Anderson's essay *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* have all made memorable contributions to the necessary demolition work, from a wide variety of socialist positions.<sup>1</sup> While Terry Lovell's book *Pictures of Reality*<sup>2</sup> has performed the valuable service of introducing some of these critiques for readers whose main concern can be assumed to be the politics of culture, it can hardly be claimed that film theory has yet begun to take stock of, or even positively to acknowledge, the radical challenge to the assumptions on which, throughout the '70s, the film theory worth engaging with was based. It is clearly significant that Lovell's book, for all its limitations an important one, has had no visible effect or influence—it has been, in fact, disgracefully ignored—and if the petering out of *Screen* as a major force inertly reflects the passing of the structuralist 'moment,' nothing of value has emerged to replace it. Indeed, film theory seems now to proceed on the assumption that nothing which need concern us has really happened, or that honour is sufficiently served, or face saved, by hole-and-corner intellectual expediency. The need for a coherent, systematic film theory—a political priority until so recently—has been studiously forgotten.

If, in such a context, one feels the need to stress the word 'criticism,' it is because the structuralist record in the performance of the critical function has been, on the whole, a poor one. The fact, given what structuralism is, hardly provokes surprise: "it is in the last resort immaterial," for Lévi-Strauss (who is in this respect perfectly representative), "whether the thought processes of the South American Indians take shape through the medium of my thought, or whether mine takes place through theirs."<sup>3</sup> Whether 'closed' or 'open,' 'realist' or 'modernist,' the text 'pro-

duced' by this method has always been exhausted in advance and cannot but serve to authenticate the discourse which articulates it. It is quite inconceivable that the text might tell creatively for the assumptions of the critic. During the structuralist heyday it was hardly necessary for the critic to be able to read, or even to make a plausible show of doing so. S/he was required instead to be an expert (at least, for the purposes of social solidarity) in structural linguistics, structural psychoanalysis, marxist theory (selected), the history of philosophy (abridged), even the higher branches of mathematics: and expertise consisted not in the capacity to grasp the relevance of these disciplines and to put them to first-hand use, but in one's readiness to apply the orthodox formulae to whatever object that offered. It was tantamount to exposing oneself as an empiricist or (worse) a Leavisite to admit to an addiction to close reading or to maintain that a text's relation to the ideologies implicit in its own modes and conventions could only be determined by an analysis of the text.

It has distinct bearings for theory that texts should be read closely, and to the extent that theory impedes or discourages close reading, or surrenders it to contingency, theory disqualifies itself for the use of the theorist of film.

Of courses deconstructionism, which—things being what they are—has found a natural home in the university, offers close reading of a kind, though it is possible to doubt that the kind is the right one. However, for the modernised, swash-buckling literary academic it is the indicated idiom, and those with an eye to the right journals can hardly afford not to cultivate it. The university presses desperately compete in the manufacture of Derridean prose, and only the most indefatigable labor amongst the groaning library shelves would make it possible to take cognizance of the 'state of the art' or to pronounce with a measure of confidence on whether it is or is not legitimate for the deconstructionist to adhere to materialism, Freudianism, feminism—to any,

indeed, of the Old Pretenders who continue to voice their tired and importunate claims against the new regime.

The cachet of the sophisticated form of academic agnosticism which deconstruction is, is very understandable. Even at its most recondite and abstruse there was still, perhaps, something unengagingly *political* about the Lacanianised materialism which flourished in the early '70s—something which intimated, in however gestural and paradoxical a way, of the necessary interconnection between the concerns of aesthetic theory and 'life.' It may well be that the unfortunate combination of arbitrariness and dogmatism which marked the political rhetoric of the Lacan period has had the effect of confirming the academic's constitutional timidity about getting mixed up with politics in the first place, and the mandarin features of the earlier project unmistakably point forward, in any case, to what has replaced it; but it would not be proper *merely* to conflate the kind of thing that used to be found in *Screen* with the indiscriminate 'deconstructions' of the artifacts, major and marginal, of the Western tradition which now grace the pages of innumerable scholarly journals.

Deconstructionism is the exemplary product of deradicalisation, and the historian of literary tastes in the 21st century, should we reach it, can be expected to have a word or two to say about the coincidence between the rise of Derrida as the presiding deity of the literature department and the less specialised political ethos of the Reagan era. No one will dispute that there is pleasure to be derived from the conviction that all totalisations (that is, all political positions) are false, and for the critic who wishes to nourish such a conviction without inviting the deadly epithet 'liberal,' the new discourse, with its air of astringent modernity, combines two obvious sources of credit.

But alas, the critic is committed to totalise. S/he will do so in any case, in that s/he uses language, and the idea that any discourse can abdicate from politics is an illusion.



The business of theory and the business of criticism cannot, in practice, be hived off from one another, and the cost of an attempt to do so is one of the fundamental lessons of the structuralist/post-structuralist phase. The cost is measured in academicism of the worst kind—narcissistic, pedantic, introverted, self-perpetuating, apolitical. Obviously, there can be no criticism without theory, but it is equally the case that there can be no viable theory without a viable sense of the nature of the critical function. Theory, for the critic, is—or ought to be—the discoveries of relevant criticism expressed as principle, and criticism is at once the practice and the critique of theory, where 'practice' consists in the attempt to define the value of objects whose significance cannot be construed in advance. Unless the critic understands what the aims and conditions of this practice are, s/he will not come up with any principles worth having: they will have no intelligible connection with the kinds of activity in which the critic actually engages.

Criticism is the systematic reading (that is, the evaluation) of texts. Like all other activities, it takes place in the present. Like all other critical activities it presupposes a principled attitude to the politics which constitute the present. The business of the film critic is to arrive at an understanding, on the basis of that attitude—which ought to be as alert and as conscious as possible—of what is of value in the past and present of the cinema and to ensure that this value is recognised for what it is, and has the influence it ought to have, now. The critic's theory should be seen in the light of this business and in no other—for there is no other test for the intellectual relevance of theory.

Criticism today, if it is to have any substance at all, must be explicitly oppositional: the critic's concern with artistic value is a concern to arrive at a sense of the conditions of profitable and progressive intervention in a dominant culture of daunting banality and impoverishment. It by no means follows from this that one is committing oneself to the

enforcement of some aesthetic 'line' or orthodoxy. The grounds for being opposed, on principle, to the notion of a socialist orthodoxy in aesthetics were classically expounded, half a century ago, by Trotsky<sup>4</sup>, and only the conservative or (it amounts to the same thing) the critic with a stake in the notion of critical 'impartiality' will maintain that political conviction and responsibility are synonymous with monolithic intransigence.

"The conditions of profitable and progressive intervention": the critic for whom these are of interest will be centrally concerned with popular culture. This interest is continuous, for me, with the belief that the advanced views on representationalism are, for all purposes of theory, criticism and practice, false, and that, whatever may be retrieved from them and put to other uses, their basic assumptions are dangerously misleading. They act as an impediment to significant theory; to the reading, in their specificity, of particular texts; and to constructive political strategies in contemporary film-making. The opposition between 'realism' and 'modernism,' between the 'closed' and the 'open' text, between the film which constructs you as a subject and the film which does not is, as construed, entirely unacceptable, and it has had the most disastrous consequences for film studies.

The valorisation of the avant-garde—the backing of a Straub/Huillet or a Wollen/Mulvey or a Peter Gidal or a Berwick Street Collective as representatives of the, or a, progressive cinema—is not an intelligible political strategy, and it is legitimate to be disturbed by the value which has often been attributed to such work. The theory which finds value of that kind here takes for granted categories and political conditions which need to be challenged, and it is necessary to reject the view according to which the popular cinema (or any cinema which can be vaguely construed as 'realist') is an object of urbane, ironical or diagnostic scrutiny and the various 'avant-gardes,' imputed or actual, acquire a privileged political signifi-

cance for theory and practice alike.

It is necessary to plan for radical interventions in a culture which extends beyond the Academy and its associated institutions, and if it is important to make judgments about, and discriminations within, the various complex traditions of popular narrative film-making that is because they have creative implications for progressive work in film-making and film studies in the present. The mapping of this enormous field, indeed, has barely begun, and many of the guides that are most often handled and most widely publicised are seriously defective.

The '80s of *Rambo* and *Je Vous Salue, Marie* (to take two obviously representative works) are not a creative period, and the difficulties of a contemporary film criticism follow from this: the contemporary world cinema is remarkable for the absence of significant development and innovation, and it would be difficult to come up with even a handful of films from the current year which are even of minor interest. That criticism in itself cannot affect this situation is obvious, but it is therefore all the more necessary to attempt to maintain the sense of what an oppositional film culture is, or might be. The time, in fact, is ripe for a reconsideration of the past and a revaluation of methods and strategies now, on the basis of a cogent radical position.

## Footnotes

1. *On Materialism*, London 1976; Mepham and Ruben, *Issues in Marxist Philosophy*, Vols. 1-3, Sussex 1979; *The Prison-House of Language* Princeton 1976; Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, London 1978; Clarke et al., *One-Dimensional Marxism*, London 1979; *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, London 1983.
2. Lovell, London 1980.
3. *The Raw and the Cooked*, London 1969, p. 13-15.
4. *Literature and Revolution*, Michigan 1971.

How could a small group of writers with an inconsistent body of work displace a century of criticism?



# Notes for a Reading of **I Walked With a Zombie**



Segment 39b. Betsy and the 'Isle of the Dead.'

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by Robln Wood

WITH THIS, THE THIRD ISSUE OF *CINE-Action!*, it is becoming clearer that the magazine's position is in certain respects uneasy and problematic. We want on the one hand to remain accessible—or at least relatively so (we don't write for people who just want to be entertained). On the other, we want seriously, and we hope formidably, to challenge the current theoretical hegemony, the structuralist/semiotic/Lacanian school. It doesn't take much reflection to realize how difficult it is to do both. Yet the two undertakings are also interdependent: our prime objection to the Lacanian school is its apparently relentless inaccessibility, and our sense that it has lost whatever political thrust it once had by becoming increasingly hermetic, self-involved, 'academic' in the worst sense. This necessitates a third undertaking, introducing further problems: to rescue from the structuralists (they might prefer 'steal') those concepts and aspects of their methodology that we value, and try at once to incorporate them in an alternative system and render them comprehensible to intelligent readers who have resisted the structuralist hegemony.

I believe myself that structuralism has revolutionized the analysis—'reading'—of films: simply to ignore the movement is automatically to render oneself obsolete. To be overwhelmed by it, on the other hand, is (as so many cases have demonstrated) to lose one's own voice and much of one's potential audience by adopting a convoluted jargon that frequently has to be translated back into English before it reveals its (often quite simple) meaning.<sup>1</sup> (In certain extremist structuralist/Marxist circles, the desire to preserve one's own voice will be instantly suspect; but I think we need not take very seriously a Marxism that has neither place nor respect for individual utterance, and no theorization of its—I was going to write 'validity'—*necessity*. It is precisely when Marxism rejects all intercourse with humanism that it becomes dangerous). I want in this article to appropriate certain concepts and procedures from the work of Roland Barthes. Strict semioticians will frown upon the appropriation, complaining that I am to some degree diverting the procedures from their original ends, diluting them, and assimilating them into a more traditional aesthetic. But no text, no concept, no procedure is sacrosanct: the critic has the right to appropriate whatever s/he needs from wherever it can be found, and use it for purposes perhaps somewhat different from the original ones. And if I, to some degree, transform Barthes, it is at least equally true that Barthes transforms me: it is impossible to adopt his methodology, in however modified a form, without simultaneously modifying (and extending) one's own.

The text that interests me here is *S/Z*. This is far from being the first attempt to apply the 'codes of realist narrative' to the reading of a film.<sup>2</sup> I lay no claim to originality, but neither am I merely imitating: both my method and my results are to some degree idiosyncratic. I shall preface the reading of *I Walked with a Zombie* (Lewton/Tourneur, 1943) with my own account of what have come to be known as 'the Barthes codes' (though they were his discovery rather than his invention) in the hope of rendering them and the reading accessible to those who have not read *S/Z* (and in the further hope of making the book more accessible too). Those already familiar (perhaps

beyond the point of saturation) with Barthes' work can of course skip, though they may wish to check up on my (mis)representation of this distinguished and important figure.

## S/Z

THE MAIN BODY OF *S/Z* CONSISTS OF A READING of Balzac's novella *Sarrasine*. One should first distinguish between 'reading' and the more traditional 'critical interpretation.' The latter usually starts from the critic's sense of what the work in question is, what it is about, what it *does*, and the interpretation will aim to establish the work's coherence (or criticize its failures to become coherent), supported by quotations of what are regarded as particularly significant passages. A reading, on the other hand, attempts to account for everything, and will be more concerned with process (the work of construction) than with establishing a definitive, coherent meaning. (There is of course no guarantee that a reading will not also start from the critic's sense of 'what the work in question is.') The reading of Balzac's 33-page novella occupies 200 pages (not counting the introductory material and the appendices), and every word of Balzac's text is quoted and annotated in the form of 'lexias' or units of reading. Barthes attributes to the classical narrative a 'limited plurality,' and seeks to demonstrate this in his reading of *Sarrasine*. On one level I find this misleading: what finally emerges from the reading is as coherent an overall sense of the novella as any 'traditional' interpretation would be likely to produce, largely free from the internal conflicts and contradictions that the promise of a 'limited plurality' might seem to suggest. *S/Z* has been widely held to mark a decisive and irreparable break with traditional notions of interpretation; it seems to me that it can just as easily be regarded as demonstrating its continuity and compatibility with them. What *S/Z* uncovers is not so much a plurality of meanings as the intricate and multi-layered nature of the activity of reading itself. Here the adoption of the word 'text' for any art work (book, film, painting, piece of music) is important. 'Text' suggests 'texture,' and a texture is composed of many interweaving strands. The analogy with weaving has a further implication, that of an intricate coherence: a texture that did not cohere would simply disintegrate.

## The Five Codes

IN HIS READING OF *SARRASINE*, BARTHES DISCOVERS that the entire novella is constructed (woven) according to the operation of five 'codes': "... there will be no other codes throughout the story but these five, and each and every lexia will fall under one of these five codes." (In fact, most of the lexias turn out to fall under several simultaneously, and this will also be the case with *I Walked with a Zombie*.) Though Barthes doesn't actually say this, the implication appears to be that all classical narratives are structured upon these five codes and only these. I have accepted this assumption in my reading on the film, but I think the acceptance should only be provisional. As I shall show, there are important differences in function and status among the five



codes (so extreme in the case of one that it seems scarcely to belong with the other four, and some alternative form of categorization may prove desirable). It also seems uncertain that the five in themselves account for *all* the possibilities of classical narrative: the case, for instance, of narratives within narratives, where the 'truth' of the internal narrative may be in question, produces problems that cannot be easily resolved within the Barthesian methodology (Ophuls' *Letter from an Unknown Woman* offers an extreme example, *I Walked with a Zombie* a minor one). I miss particularly the inclusion of an *authorial* code, that would allow for the annotation of all those points (so important a feature of the 'pleasure of the text') where we recognize an author's imprint (whether thematic or stylistic): Barthes was of course committed to a view of art that virtually obliterates the notion of individual authorship, so the omission is understandable if not excusable.

The clearest way to elucidate the codes is by means of examples. I have chosen to concoct my own sentence (to be imagined as the opening of either a story or a chapter of a novel), not because it is beautiful prose but because I can ensure that it exemplifies all five of the codes:

*The day of the picnic, awaited by Max with his usual youthful eagerness, began under the auspices of Phoebe, but little did he guess in what darkness it would end.*

As a transition to film, I shall take as second instance the opening shot of *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, chosen because (a) it is probably familiar to most readers and (b) it also happens to exemplify all five of the codes very clearly and precisely.<sup>3</sup> Here, then, are the five codes of realist (or classical) narrative.

1. The *Proairetic* code (from the Greek for 'actions'): the code that gives us the series of actions upon which the narrative is constructed: in the above sentence, the action of "the picnic." Immediately, we must face a possible objection from those hitherto innocent of semiotics, an objection to the term 'code.' Everyone knows that a narrative consists of actions and could not exist without them; every schoolchild can follow the actions through a narrative. The term 'code' implies the work of decoding, and no such work is necessary here—we are not idiots, thank you. The answer is, first, that the act of decoding is so long-ingrained and so familiar as to be entirely automatic, but, second, that such an act does indeed take place. My sentence does not merely convey the fact that a picnic is to take place, it alerts us (because of our familiarity with other narratives) to an implied process of narrative structure: an account of the picnic will follow; it will occupy at the very least a paragraph, probably a chapter, perhaps several chapters (or, if this is the beginning of a story, the entire narrative); the account will probably be subdivisible into numerous stages (preparations, departure, events on the way, choice of a site, events during the picnic, etc.); eventually we shall be told what happened, the action will be concluded and (if this is part of a novel) will give rise in turn to other actions.

The *proairetic* code is indeed the fundamental one on which the narrative edifice is built: without actions even the most elementary narrative would be impossible (provided we understand 'actions' in the widest sense, to include for example the act of thinking or sleeping). What needs to be stressed here is the interweaving of actions in classical narrative: there must be no hiatus, one action must be prepared as one is completed. Even if, as in certain Victorian novels, the action is suspended while the author moralizes, the logical chain will be resumed as soon as the moralizing ceases. Usually, however long the work, there will be a *dominant* action overarching and

encompassing the entire structure. For example, a novel might begin with a ship leaving Southampton and end with it docking in New York: the dominant action would be 'trans-Atlantic voyage.' In between the departure and the docking, however, we shall be led through the narrative by a continuous, often overlapping, series of subordinate actions: A and B will fall in love, C will be murdered, D will be unmasked as an enemy agent, the captain will go insane, a giant man-eating spider will be discovered in the boiler-room . . . . The typical dominant action of classical narrative (linking *War and Peace* to *The Sure Thing*) is the construction of the 'good' or 'normal' heterosexual couple (it is likely that, in our hypothetical novel, this will coincide with the end of the voyage, after all the threats have been systematically eliminated).

The opening shot of *Letter from an Unknown Woman* offers us two actions (one shown visually, the other introduced in the dialogue): the arrival home, the duel. The latter is indeed the dominant action of the film—it has not even been concluded at the end, though we know by then what its outcome will be. The former is the first small, finite action in a *proairetic chain*—arrival home, preparations for departure, interruption, reading the letter—which will guide us through the film.

2. The *Hermeneutic* code (from the Greek for 'enigmas'): the proposal, development and eventual resolution of puzzles, questions, mysteries. In my sentence, "little did he know . . ." immediately presents an enigma, providing the reader with knowledge to which poor, eager, unsuspecting Max does not have access, but not too much knowledge: we know that something frightful will happen, but we shall have to wait (perhaps for a hundred pages) to find out what. The privileged site of the hermeneutic code is clearly the detective novel: someone is found murdered on page one, and 200 pages later the great detective expounds the solution, unmasks the culprit. Again, we find a *dominant enigma* ('Who done it?') encompassing the whole narrative, with a continual play of enigmas (clues, mysterious utterances, anonymous letters, red herrings) interweaving throughout. But every classical narrative plays on suspense and curiosity to some degree. One might certainly argue that the *proairetic* code, every time an action is introduced, implies an enigma ('What will happen?') automatically. This shows how intimately the two codes are interrelated, but it seems reasonable to follow Barthes in reserving the hermeneutic code for the stronger and more explicit introduction and pursuit of specific enigmas. One might make the distinction by suggesting that, while actions are essential to a narrative, enigmas (in the strict sense) are not, and one might construct a (very boring) narrative without any ("I went for a walk. I met a friend. We talked about the weather. We said goodbye. I went home.").

The *Letter* shot is particularly rich in enigmas, all surrounding the action of the duel: Why is it being fought?—Who is the opponent?—Will Stefan fight?—Will he be killed? All these are answered, but not until the very end of the film, during its closing minutes. This gives us another (almost) absolute principle of the hermeneutic code: that, just as every action must be concluded, so every enigma must be resolved. (I shall argue that it is one of the distinctions and eccentricities of *Zombie* that one of its enigmas, a crucial one, is left disturbingly unresolved). We may also notice another common feature of the *hermeneutic chain*, that of *apparent but false* resolution (I call it 'blocking,' in preference to the standard translation's 'jamming') in order further to postpone the true one: the question as to whether Stefan will stay to fight the duel is apparently answered in the negative in the following scene ("Pack my things . . . Enough for an indefinite stay."). Typically, this takes the form of a kind of teasing: if we really



believed, beyond doubt, that we had already been given the 'true' solution, we might be tempted to close the book, walk out of the movie, then and there (compare Hitchcock's audacity, bitterly resented by many spectators, in supplying us with the true solution to *Vertigo's* dominant enigma, beyond any uncertainty, two-thirds of the way through the film). In the example from *Letter*, we are not really convinced that the film's male protagonist, played by a prominent star, will not fight the duel. We shall encounter excellent examples of 'blocking' in *Zombie* (even in the opening credit-title shot).

Clearly, the proairetic and hermeneutic codes belong together: they continually intertwine and supplement each other, their joint task is to push, guide, lure us step by step through the narrative, always focusing our attention on the future ('What will happen?') so that we read on; they are the codes that 'tell the story.' We can designate them as the *linear* or *horizontal* codes (in contradistinction from the other three).

In the classical Hollywood cinema (and most post-classical) they are always dominant (audiences go to Hollywood movies 'for the story') and on the rare occasions when their dominance is challenged (*Heaven's Gate*) the work is considered inept. They also represent the level at which the work of producing and reading narratives is likely to be most fully conscious, on the part of both maker and viewer, and also, crucially, on the part of the censorship (literal and symbolic, external and internal). Hence, in the classical Hollywood narrative, the tendency of the linear codes will almost always (there are very few exceptions) be ideologically conservative, leading us, with endless repetition, towards the restoration of the patriarchal-capitalist status quo ('normality') and its attendant value-system. (Critics and theorists who dismiss the Hollywood cinema outright habitually reduce Hollywood movies to the operation of the linear codes, ignoring the rest).

3. The *Semantic* code (from the Greek for 'meanings'): corresponding roughly to what traditional aesthetics would call the 'thematic' level of the narrative. Barthes tells us that this is most commonly attached to characters, and reflection proves him correct (in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* respectively, the themes of indecision and ambition are clearly introduced and developed through the protagonists). In my sentence, "awaited by Max with his usual youthful eagerness" suggests the themes (or 'meanings') of anticipation, youth, innocence: themes that may or may not prove to be important in the total structure of the work, but which are here attached to what may be its main character. The *Letter* example offers most obviously the theme of *decadence* (the men are returning from some kind of nocturnal debauch, at 2.00 a.m.), attached especially to Stefan (he has been over-indulging in cognac, hates getting up in the morning, and is cynical about death and honor). We may notice also, however, the theme of *time* (the clock, the men's promise to return at five), which is not a part of the characterization but will be a major preoccupation of the narrative. There will of course be 'meanings' that are merely transitory and incidental, dropped as soon as introduced—'meanings' that never become 'themes,' the defining characteristic of a theme being recurrence. We may say in general that the more frequently a theme recurs from lexia to lexia (perhaps in a variety of forms and modes, from serious to comic, from emphatic statement to glancing allusion) the more important it will prove in the total structure.

4. The *Symbolic* code. We are all familiar with the notion of symbolism. Barthes demonstrates very impressively (though the idea is scarcely new to criticism—see, for example, F.R. Leavis' concepts of 'symbolic drama' and 'dramatic poem'; extended to works of fiction generally) that symbolism is not

something applied occasionally to a work like cherries on a cake but a major structuring principle. He shows that the symbolic structure of a work typically organizes itself in terms of *oppositions*. In my sentence, the obviously 'symbolic' use of "darkness" implies one of the fundamental symbolic oppositions of our culture: light/darkness, day/night, happiness/tragedy, good/evil. The *Letter* shot plays on much the same opposition: the *night* and *rain* in which the film opens will be replaced in the precisely symmetrical last shot (the carriage drives away from the same gates) by *near-dawn* and *no-rain*, expressing the film's progress from confusion to enlightenment, from the dominance of worldliness and corruption to the triumph of spirituality. The symbolic oppositions will not be arbitrary or haphazard: all will relate to all (though the relationship may be complex).

It swiftly becomes clear that, just as the proairetic and hermeneutic codes are more or less inextricably interconnected and interdependent, so too are the semantic and symbolic codes (and more rather than less). The themes of a work will inevitably be drawn into its pattern of oppositions (Hamlet's indecision against the promptness of Laertes, the murderous ambition of the Macbeths against the loyalty of Banquo and Macduff): even within my sentence, Max's eager anticipation has its answer in the threat of disaster, and these correspond to the *symbolic* opposition of day/night. In *Letter*, Stefan's disillusioned decadence will be answered by Lisa's idealistic purity, and these are taken up in the rain/no-rain, night/near-dawn oppositions. One could of course equally put it the other way around: the symbolic oppositions invariably have a thematic dimension. Consequently, in my reading of *Zombie*, I have not been too scrupulous about distinguishing these two codes: as a theme encounters its opposite I have tended to gather them into the symbolic code and to speak of the film's *semantic/symbolic structure* as an entity (which does not mean that it is monolithic or free of internal tensions). The relationship of this structure to the linear structure produced by the work of the proairetic and hermeneutic codes can range from the simply supportive (in our more rudimentary narratives) to the highly complex. In general, the semantic/symbolic structure of a work is likely to be far less accessible to consciousness (of the maker, the viewer, the censorship) than the progress of the linear code ('the story'). One can therefore at this stage posit the possibility that the two pairs of codes may develop in a state of permanent tension (perhaps contradiction) rather than in simple co-operation or mutual support. I shall go on to declare that such is indeed the case with large numbers of distinguished Hollywood films, and this is why those critics who reduce the films to the progress of the linear codes are quite simply wrong.

5. The *Cultural* code (Barthes also calls it the code of *reference*): reference to shared, familiar knowledge within the culture, such as proverbs, common sayings, mythology, topical events, famous people. In my sentence, we have to know that Phoebus is the Greek sun-god if we are to grasp the meaning. Barthes acknowledges that in a sense *all* the codes are cultural: we have to learn to read narratives, though the learning took place so early in our lives that the process has become entirely naturalized. However, he retains the cultural code for the annotation of specific references. It seems to me that this 'code' does not really belong with the other four, its function being entirely different: they are structural codes, this is not (except in so far as the references are drawn into the semantic/symbolic structure, in which case they can be grouped under those codes). Analysis of the cultural code belongs, in fact, to a simpler (though very important) stage in the development of semiotics, that represented by Barthes' earlier *Mythologies*: the



exploration of a culture's 'myths' through its specific individual artifacts and practices (wrestling, steak-and-chips, Garbo's face, etc.). As I am concerned in this paper with structure, I have ignored the cultural code *as such* altogether, preferring to group many of its instances under the canopy of the semantic and symbolic codes. It is probable that *all* manifestations of the cultural code can be grouped in this way: the obvious one in the *Letter* shot, for example (the caption "Vienna, about 1900"), immediately evokes not only the music (from Mozart to popular waltzes) that plays so important a part in the film's thematic development and its analysis of class, but also the connotations of '*fin de siècle*' that attach themselves to the theme of decadence. Or take two striking examples from the décor of Jessica's bedroom in *Zombie*, the harp and Böcklin's painting 'The Isle of the Dead': both belong within the cultural code (we have to know not only what a harp is but also its association with angels, hence with a certain cultural myth of woman), but they equally belong to the semantic/symbolic structure (the harp standing in opposition to the voodoo drums).

### Is It Worth It?

**F**INALLY, THE READER MAY ASK WHAT IS gained by a method of analysis that requires such an elaborate exposition. First, quite simply, it helps one to notice (become aware of) so much more: take a sequence from any film with which you believe yourself to be thoroughly familiar, look at it again in relation to the four (or five) codes, and see how many details that previously passed by uncommented suddenly relate, make sense, form patterns with other details across the film. Beyond that, the method greatly heightens one's awareness of structure and the *process of structuration*. Beyond that again, it makes possible a rigorous and systematic investigation into what has proved by far the most fruitful concept in recent approaches to Hollywood, the concept of *ideological tension or contradiction*. I hope these claims will be substantiated by the (admittedly skeletal) reading that follows.

To make that skeletal method clear, I close this introduction

by showing how the two examples I have used can be succinctly annotated.

#### My sentence:

- PRO.: "picnic" (statement of action).  
 HER.: "little did he guess . . ." (enigma).  
 SEM.: "awaited . . . with his usual youthful eagerness" (themes of anticipation and innocence).  
 SYM.: "auspices of Phoebus," "in what darkness . . ." (opposition of day/night, light/darkness, happiness/disaster).

#### The Letter shot:

- PRO.: arrival home; duel (dominant action).  
 HER.: Why is the duel being fought?—Who is the antagonist?—Will Stefan fight?—Will he be killed?  
 SEM.: decadence (cynicism, cognac, '*fin de siècle*'); time, passing of time (three hours).  
 SYM.: rain and night (answered at end of film by no-rain and near-dawn).

### Why 'I Walked With a Zombie'?

**A** COMPLEX OF REASONS. FIRST, I NEEDED A film to which I had easy access (the analysis demanding prolonged and intensive work) and which is in distribution (it has also been repeatedly shown on pay-TV) so that interested readers might have access to it also. Second, I wanted an unquestionably distinguished film with a very rich semantic/symbolic structure, but one which nevertheless was securely contained within the bounds of classical Hollywood narrative, a film at once representative and exemplary. Third, I wanted a film as short as possible, for obvious reasons (this article is already lengthy enough—imagine the method applied to *Duel in the Sun* or *The Deer Hunter*!). I should add that I have loved *I Walked with a Zombie* for many years: this is not an 'objective' academic exercise carried out upon a film whose title was produced out of a hat (an exercise of which I think I would be absolutely incapable).

## THE READING

This is an attempt to outline the basis for a complete reading of a specific classical Hollywood narrative (one of great distinction), and to suggest, at the same time, how classical Hollywood narratives work, the process of their construction. The major omission is a very serious one: there is no adequate attention to the operation of the 'codes specific to film'—camera placement, camera movement, camera angle, editing, lighting, framing, etc.—but to attempt this as well would make the exercise virtually interminable!

The film, just under 70 minutes long, consists of 509 shots. I have broken it down into 46 segments, roughly along the lines of Metz's *Grande Syntagmatique*.<sup>4</sup> In most cases the 'autonomy' of the segment is clearly marked (change of location, time lapse, cinematic punctuation such as fades or dissolves); in a few cases my divisions are more questionable, especially that between segments 28/29 (which occurs in the middle of a shot). The great majority of the segments are, in Metzian terminology, either 'scenes' or 'ordinary sequences,' and I have not

bothered to specify these, noting only the more unusual types.

The figures in brackets denote the number of shots in each segment (I have tried for perfect accuracy, but there may be errors).

#### 1(1). Title, credits, opening shot.

Diegetic<sup>5</sup> ambiguity: though seemingly 'realistic,' the shot has no logical place within the narrative. Purely 'poetic' status?

- Title: PRO.: the walk (specific reference to canefield sequence?)  
 HER.: the zombie  
 Visual: PRO.: the walk (an impossible one).  
 HER.: the zombie (blocking of enigma: the zombie referred to in the title is Jessica, not Carrefour).  
 SEM.: freedom, space; harmony between races (deception).  
 SYM.: land/sea (the figures walking along the boundary between); black/white (race, clothing—the black cape).

NOTE: Beginning of Betsy's narration.

(Cont'd on page 15)





1. The opening shot.



3. Paul, Betsy; the rope ladder.



5. The carriage-ride.



6a. Ti-Misery.



6b. Betsy and the shadow.





9. Jessica's first appearance.



10. The nurse meets her patient.



11. The brioche.



13. Betsy, doctor, harp.



17. Betsy, Mrs. Rand, Wesley, calypso singer.



21. Betsy by the sea.





27. Alma's directions.



28. Carrefour.



29. Jessica and Betsy.



31. Mrs. Rand, the lamp.



37. Carrefour and the Jessica-doll.



39a. Betsy, the harp, Carrefour's shadow.  
(see page 6 for 39b.)





40. Confession; handkerchief as voodoo patch.



41. Wesley, Paul; handkerchief as voodoo patch.



44. Wesley with Jessica's body; Carrefour.



45. Nocturnal fishing.



46. Carrefour with Jessica's body; Ti-Misery.



## 2(7). *The Office.*

Establishing shot: 'Parish and Burden'

SEM.: Connotations of religion and slavery.

The scene:

PRO.: the interview (completed here); the journey—i: announcement; the job (continued to end of film).

HER.: Who is Betsy's employer? Nature of wife's illness? Question about witchcraft?

SEM.: Betsy as nurse (service, dedication, purity); Betsy's rationalism (witchcraft); Betsy's romantic aspirations (fantasy of West Indies); dominant position of male, submissive position of female.

SYM.: Canada/West Indies, medicine/witchcraft, rationalism/superstition.

## 3(13). *The Ship.*

PRO.: journey—ii. the ship; the relationship between Paul and Betsy (beginning—the dominant action of the film?).

HER.: Why does Paul behave like that?

SEM.: Bitterness, destruction of illusions (Paul's character); deceptiveness of appearances; romantic aspirations (beauty, the ladder, the stars); death ('Everything dies here'); dominance (male over female, master over workers, white over black).

SYM.: development of semantic connotations into structure of oppositions: Canada/West Indies, white/black, master/slave, male/female, illusion/reality, life/death, beauty/horror.

Note: Betsy's reaction to Paul ('Clean, honest') will be echoed in segment 33 by Paul's words to Betsy ('Clean, decent, thinking').

## 4(3). *Disembarkation.*

PRO.: journey—iii: arrival at St. Sebastian.

HER.: Paul's absence (SEM.: aloofness).

SEM.: Cultural difference.

## 5(5). *The carriage.*

PRO.: journey - iv: driving to Fort Holland.

SEM.: cultural difference; Betsy's rationalism ('You mean a figurehead'); domination and oppression (linked especially to the name 'Holland,' hence indirectly to Paul, not Wesley); deceptiveness of appearances ('If you say, Miss . . .') again linked to 'beauty'; black subservience.

SYM.: white/black (race); rationalism/superstition; power/oppression.

Note: Ti-Misery introduced as emblem of oppression and black ('his black face').

6(13). **Fort Holland.** The sequence is unclassifiable within Metz's categories as it moves from chronological narrative into an a-chronological 'descriptive syntagma' and back again, the transitions linked by Betsy's narration. The three sub-sections are:

a. Characterized by Betsy's POV (7 shots):

PRO.: journey (concluded): arrival.

SEM.: rationalism undermined in this new world ('. . . like a dream').

SYM.: Ti-Misery/St. Sebastian, uniting white/black, Christian/non-Christian.

b. 'Descriptive syntagma': the rooms (three shots linked by dissolves).

c. Return to chronology: Betsy preparing from dinner (three shots).

PRO.: dinner: i. - preparation.

SEM.: shadow-patterns, evoking notions of uncertainty, ambiguity, confusion; deceptiveness of appearances (sinister shadow is merely the servant announcing dinner).

## 7(6). *The dining-room.*

PRO.: dinner: ii - the family.

HER.: enigmas surrounding Mrs. Rand (runs dispensary but not a doctor; doesn't live in her own home); Jessica (Wesley's tone of voice).

SEM.: male authority - the two fathers (Holland/capitalism, Rand/religion, both names carrying connotations of South Africa, imperialism, oppression of blacks).

SYM.: the system of oppositions: the half-brothers, dominance/subordination ('Masters of the house').

## 8(16). *The dining-room (later).*

PRO.: dinner: iii - completion.

HER.: reasons for Wesley's hostility to Paul, and for his heavy drinking; the tower, the obscure door, Jessica's dinner.

SEM.: Wesley's weakness, bitterness, envy and enmity; deceptiveness of appearances (the work-drum and 'voodoo').

SYM.: the half-brothers (British/American, dominant/subordinate); Christianity/voodoo (the drums linked to mention of Mr. Rand as missionary).

## 9(7). *Betsy's bedroom.*

PRO.: preparation for bed, first sight of patient.

HER.: Jessica, the tower, her illness.

SEM.: association of Jessica with darkness, nature, mystery, beauty.

SYM.: light/darkness (the abrupt switch from clearcut image to criss-cross of shadows, in which Betsy herself is included).

## 10(39) *The tower.*

PRO.: Betsy's job, encountering her patient.

HER.: Jessica's strangeness, her unnatural height, threatening movements; nature of her illness.

SEM.: deceptiveness of appearances, cultural difference (the crying). The crying also signifies oppression, with several forms linked together: (a) Ti-Misery (the visual image), (b) Jessica (who Betsy thinks is the source), (c) the black slaves and their descendants.

SYM.: white/black (race - the two united in Ti-Misery); white/black, Jessica in white; brunette/blonde: reversal of conventions, undermining of expectations.

Hence:

SEM.: Betsy and Jessica as inverse mirror-images.

SEM.: the real attitude of black servants to white masters (Alma's sarcastic remarks about Betsy: compare next segment).

## 11(9). *Betsy's bedroom.*

PRO.: breakfast in bed.

HER.: Jessica's illness: explanation i ('She was very sick, and then she went mindless'); explanation vague and unsatisfying, developing rather than resolving the enigma.



SEM.: cultural difference (method of awakening; the brioche/puff-up); deceptiveness of appearances (the brioche; Alma's obsequiousness - compare previous segment); class division, Betsy's indeterminate place as Jessica's nurse; the dialogue connects Jessica and Betsy (the past and future Mrs. Holland).

Note: Jessica referred to as 'doll' ('It's just like dressing a great big doll'); compare the 'Jessica-doll' of the voodoo scenes.

#### 12(3). *Paul's workroom.*

PRO.: the Betsy/Paul relationship.

HER.: Jessica's illness: explanation ii ('... a mental case'); parial, misleading.

SEM.: Betsy's uniform (whiteness, purity, service); fear of 'the dark' (commonest symbol for the unconscious).

Note: The watch-pendant (visual motif) introduced here.

#### 13(8). *Jessica's bedroom.*

HER.: Jessica's illness: explanation iii ('tropical fever'); false resolution ('blocking'); introduction of notion that Jessica is a zombie (the truth disguised as a joke).

SEM./CUL.: the harp (white culture; woman as angel).

SYM.: harp/voodoo (talk of the zombies).

SEM.: 'Isle of the Dead' (Böcklin's painting, also the title of the last of the series of Lewton-produced horror films); borderline between life and death.

#### 14(6). *The veranda.*

PRO.: Paul/Betsy relationship.

HER.: Paul's actual feelings for Betsy; reasons for his bitterness.

SEM.: deceptiveness of appearances (what is 'beautiful?')

#### 15(2). *St. Sebastian.*

PRO.: day off, visit to town - i: meeting Wesley.

SEM.: cultural difference, whites as aliens.

#### 16(20). *The cafe: day.*

PRO.: visit to town - ii: drinks.

HER.: the song, hints of family scandal, of the background to Jessica's illness and Paul's bitterness.

SEM.: tensions and disunity within the family; deceptiveness of appearances, problems of interpreting behavior: (a) singer's subservience barely concealing insolence (compare Alma); (b) Paul and the word 'beautiful'; (c) Paul's motivation - using Jessica to see Wesley 'squirm.'

SYM.: white/black (race), calypso and 'the British Grenadiers'; whites as concealers of truth, blacks as revealers of truth.

#### 17(14). *The cafe: night.*

PRO.: visit to town - iii: concluded.

HER.: Jessica's illness - explanation iv: the conclusion of the song links it to adultery, suggests it may be a punishment for immorality.

SEM.: woman as bringer of discord - parallel between Jessica and Betsy, past and future trouble, in the song; hence:

HER.: will both brothers fall in love with Betsy, repeating past history? (false enigma).

SEM.: family tension (the song); Mrs. Rand introduces herself as 'Wesley's mother' (she is also Paul's), suggesting favoritism, a further reason for rivalry/resentment.

SEM.: singer paralleled to Jessica as threat (approaching Betsy out of the darkness); association of Jessica with the blacks (racial oppression, gender oppression).

SYM.: light/darkness (the CU lamp, the night); white/black (singer and darkness).

PRO.: Betsy to help Wesley (alcohol); Betsy/Paul relationship (hints of Betsy's influence); hence:

SEM.: Mrs. Rand's knowledge, and:

HER.: Where does she get her information?

#### 18(5). *Fort Holland.*

PRO.: helping Wesley: Betsy speaks to Paul.

SEM.: uncertainty of motivation (Paul's refusal).

SYM.: clarity vs. confusion or obscurity: silhouette image followed by faces shadowed with lines.

#### 19(20). *The dining-room.*

PRO.: helping Wesley (no decanter); the Betsy/Paul relationship (Betsy's influence).

HER.: voodoo (conch, drums); question of Paul's treatment of Jessica, secrets in the past.

SYM.: white rituals/black rituals (formal dinner, voodoo ceremony); home/houmfort (the 'home' is also a 'Fort').

#### 20(16). *Paul's room.*

PRO.: Paul/Betsy relationship: growth of intimacy, mutual attraction.

HER.: Jessica's illness - explanation v: the quarrel (note parallel development of dominant action and dominant enigma). Again, the 'false' explanation juxtaposed with hints of the true one (the drums, association of Jessica with voodoo).

SEM.: Chopin's E major Etude, but more familiar to audiences as 'So deep is the night ...'.

SYM.: piano/voodoo drums, white culture/black culture.

#### 21(2). *The Sea.*

PRO.: Betsy's recognition of her love for Paul and her decision to help him determines the entire chain of subsequent actions to the end of the film: the insulin treatment, the visit to the houmfort, the 'voodoo' invasion of the white world. It can therefore be claimed as the turning-point of the film.

HER.: What exactly will Betsy do? Can she save Jessica? Does she really want to?

SEM./SYM.: the sea, already established in segment 3 as image of uncertainty, deceptiveness of appearances, linked here to doubts about Betsy's motivation.

Note i: symmetry of classical narrative: the sea at the beginning (segment 3) and end (segments 44-45) of the film, and also at this near midpoint.

Note ii: end of Betsy's narration (because she can no longer control a narrative that calls into question her own motivation?)

#### 22(3). *Jessica's room (day).*

PRO.: saving Jessica - i:a. insulin shock treatment.



SEM.: danger (Jessica may be killed - question of Betsy's true motivation).

**23(4). Jessica's room (night).**

PRO.: saving Jessica - i:b. failure.

SEM.: uncertainty of motivation (Wesley's speech makes this explicit); darkness and the unconscious.

SYM.: light/darkness.

Note: the threatening figure (here Wesley) approaching out of the darkness, recurrent motif (compare Jessica in segment 10, calypso singer in segment 17).

**24(20). The veranda.**

PRO.: saving Jessica - ii: voodoo: a. suggestion ('better doctors')

HER.: witchcraft; will Betsy take Alma's advice?

SEM.: uncertain motivation (here, Alma in relation to Jessica: help her, or get her to the hounfort for 'test?')

SEM./SYM.: the drawing together of major components of the system of oppositions: white/black, science/voodoo, rationalism/superstition. The collapse of Betsy's rationalist certitude is linked to her troubled, unclear motivation (loss of self-image).

Note: visual motif: the brooch for Ti-Victor (compare Betsy's watch-pendant).

**25(4). The dispensary.**

PRO.: saving Jessica - ii: voodoo: b. proposal.

HER.: the hounfort and possibility of danger.

SYM.: Christianity/voodoo ('... one foot in the church and one in the hounfort'); science/voodoo; church/hounfort, dispensary/hounfort; rationalism/superstition (psychological explanation for Mamma Rose's cure).

**26(1). The garden: sequence shot.**

PRO.: visit to the hounfort - i: departure.

SEM.: continuous camera-movement to connect Paul, Wesley, Betsy/Jessica, Alma and Ti-Misery: theme of interconnectedness, breakdown of clear divisions, female transgression.

SYM.: movement from light to darkness (the black exit).

**27(2). Outside the gate.**

PRO.: visit to the hounfort - ii: directions.

HER.: will they get lost? - what will happen?

SYM.: light/darkness (complex image with Alma, flour, flashlight, Betsy's black cape); the voodoo patches (compare Betsy's watch-pendant, Ti-Victor's brooch); black/white (race and clothing), dark/fair.

SEM.: 'Carrefour' (French for crossroads) - passing from one world to another; female transgression.

**28(31½). The canefields.**

PRO.: visit to hounfort - iii: the walk.

HER.: will they get lost?; significance of the various sinister objects.

SEM.: voodoo (conch), death, the 'living dead' (Jessica linked to images of death, her dress brushing past the skull, etc.); Carrefour - passing the crossroads (point of no return?)

SYM.: white/black (clothing, patches), rationalism/superstition; passage from 'white' world to 'black,' from science to voodoo, from conscious to unconscious (the darkness as the world of the unconscious).

Note: I have segmented the film here according to precise locations; Betsy and Jessica pass from the canefields to the site of the voodoo ceremonies, marking the transgression of another boundary, within a single shot, half of which belongs to this segment, half to the next.

**29(16½). The hounfort.**

PRO.: visit to hounfort - iv: the ceremony.

HER.: significance of dance, danger for intruders.

SEM.: subjugation of women, phallic power (the dancers); possession; Betsy and Jessica linked in frame, like doubles (female transgression).

SYM.: development of interlocking systems of oppression: white/black, master/servant, male/female.

**30(8). Outside the door.**

PRO.: visit to hounfort - v: plea to Umbala.

HER.: the door, what is behind it?

SYM.: medicine/voodoo; Betsy as white nurse involving herself in irrational practices associated with blacks.

**31(22). Alternating sequence: Inside and outside.**

PRO.: visit to hounfort - vi: revelation, failure; beginning of attempts to reclaim Jessica as zombie.

HER.: resolution of some enigmas (Betsy's danger, what is at hounfort: etc.), development of others (nature of Jessica's illness - she doesn't bleed - partial revelation of 'true' explanation).

SEM.: compromise, corruption, ambiguity ('... there's no easy way to do good, Betsy' - compare Betsy's own behavior and motivation); female transgression (theme connecting Jessica, Betsy and Mrs. Rand).

SYM.: some of the structural oppositions abruptly drawn together in the ambiguous figure of Mrs. Rand: science/voodoo, Christianity/voodoo; darkness/light.

**32(2). The canefields.**

PRO.: visit to hounfort - vii: the return journey.

HER.: will they be pursued?

**33(4). Fort Holland: the garden.**

PRO.: visit to hounfort - viii: homecoming; Betsy/Paul relationship: deeper understanding.

HER.: Paul's real feelings about Jessica (explanation).

SEM.: 'the nurse who's afraid of the dark' - fear of darkness, the unconscious.

SYM.: white music (Chopin theme on soundtrack) contrasted with voodoo drums of preceding segments; 'clean, decent thinking' vs. unconscious motivation.

**34(8). The garden (day).**

PRO.: visit of commissioner.

HER.: reason for visit?; connection with visit to hounfort?; danger of voodoo?



SEM.: class/race difference - the white lady's knowledge of horses; male/female relations (leading horse without looking at him); horse as representative of (male, white) authority (commissioner, police, Paul); uncertain motivation (Alma's 'stupidity' as possible cover for eavesdropping?).

**35(1). *The hounfort (anticipation of 37).***

PRO.: getting Jessica back - i: ritual.  
HER.: witchcraft, meaning and effectiveness of ritual.  
SEM.: male domination of women; Jessica as 'doll' (compare No. 11).  
SYM.: white/black, rationalism/superstition.

**36(3). *Jessica's room.***

PRO.: Paul/Betsy relationship: mutual respect.  
HER.: relationship between Jessica and voodoo? Paul's guilt?  
SEM.: male/female relations: male authority, female submissiveness (deviousness?).  
SYM.: harp/drums.

**37(5). *The hounfort.***

PRO.: getting Jessica back - ii: the agent.  
HER.: precise meaning of ritual? Carrefour as zombie?  
SEM.: the 'living dead': connection between Jessica and Carrefour.  
SYM.: white/black: blurring of boundary.

**38(5). *The garden.***

PRO.: Paul/Betsy relationship: confession of love, need for separation.  
HER.: will Betsy return to Canada?  
SEM.: male authority/female submissiveness (deviousness?); male desire to dominate/destroy women - Paul's fear of his own impulses.  
SYM.: Canada/West Indies.

**39(43). *Jessica's room - garden.***

PRO.: getting Jessica back - iii: the agent, failure.  
HER.: Carrefour as zombie: is he dangerous? will he succeed? basis of Mrs. Rand's authority over him?  
SEM.: Mrs. Rand's authority, her usurpation of power, transgression of male order.  
SYM.: home (Fort)/hounfort - transgression of barriers; harp/shadow of Carrefour.  
SEM.: 'Isle of the Dead.'

**40(34). *The living-room.***

PRO.: investigation, confession.  
HER.: Jessica's illness: explanation vi: the 'true' explanation, immediately blocked by Dr. Maxwell (Jessica never died), followed at once by new enigma (Mrs. Rand's 'of course').  
SEM.: family tensions; repression/punishment of female sexual desire; ambiguity of Mrs. Rand's position (she destroyed Jessica in order to protect the patriarchal system within which women are subordinated, siding with the 'firstborn,' Paul, for whom she never shows any affection, against Wesley, whom she loves); the oppressed become in turn oppressors.  
SYM.: the 'white' system (patriarchy, the family) and the 'black' system (voodoo) joined as oppressive sys-

tems; the major oppositions undermined in Mrs. Rand.

Note: recurrent visual motif: Mrs. Rand's pocket handkerchief as voodoo-patch.

**41(17). *Hounfort, garden (alternating sequence).***

PRO.: getting Jessica back - iv: another ritual.  
HER.: Jessica's illness: explanation vi confirmed (removal of 'block' by revelation of coma; Jessica's response to ritual).  
SEM.: voodoo as black male power.  
SYM.: the half-brothers, the 'righteous' and the 'sinner,' on opposite sides of gate (Paul's scepticism, Wesley's belief in voodoo); echoed by Betsy/Jessica opposition.

Note: recurrent visual motif: the pocket handkerchief as voodoo-patch, here associated most prominently with Paul, the apparently 'righteous' brother who doesn't believe in voodoo; hence:

SEM.: undermining of moral certainties.

**42(6). *The garden, the veranda.***

PRO.: 'freeing' Jessica - i: Betsy's complicity sought.  
HER.: what will become of Jessica?  
SEM.: Betsy's 'integrity': she can't do deliberately what she has tried to do unconsciously (eliminate Jessica).  
SYM.: Ti-Misery (the white/black opposition undermined).

Note: Recurrent visual motif: watch pendant as voodoo-patch.

**43(12). *The garden, the hounfort (alternating sequence).***

PRO.: 'freeing' Jessica - ii: Wesley as agent.  
HER.: Jessica's fate.  
SYM.: the oppositions joined in Wesley (acting as another 'zombie'); use of arrow from Ti-Misery.

**44(27). *The seashore.***

PRO.: 'freeing' Jessica - iii: 'death.'  
HER.: resolution of problems.  
SEM.: oppression involving both worlds, white/black, Christian/voodoo, rational/irrational: the problematic of transgressive sexual desire (especially female desire) and its punishment or elimination to maintain the patriarchal order.  
SYM.: white/black: possession of Jessica (Wesley/Carrefour).

**45(7). *The sea.***

PRO.: recovery of bodies - i: the sea  
SEM.: the sea, as signifier of uncertainty, deceptiveness, ambiguity (compare segment 3)  
SYM.: voice of minister (black, Christian) begins on soundtrack; hence:  
SEM.: undermining of oppositions; continuance of oppression

**46(7). *The garden.***

PRO.: recovery of bodies - ii: procession home; resolution of Paul/Betsy relationship.  
SEM.: a. the 'happy end.'  
b. continuance of themes of oppression, ambiguity, undermining of clear-cut oppositions: the black minister, Mrs. Rand, Ti-Misery (on whom the film ends).



## Appendix I: Beyond the Grande Syntagmatique.

**A** NUMBER OF CRITICS (NOTABLY RAYMOND Bellour) have pointed out that, while it makes a useful starting-point for segmentation and analysis, Metz's *Grande Syntagmatique* can have the unfortunate side effect of exaggerating the autonomy of the so-called 'autonomous segments'—that the individual segment is invariably contained within larger patterns of alternation, repetition and symmetry that structure the entire film. It is scarcely possible here to demonstrate this systematically and exhaustively; I have selected three examples which at once illuminate particular aspects of *I Walked with a Zombie* and illustrate the working of classical Hollywood films in general. The first two concern the film's overall structure, the third exemplifies the patterns of symmetry and asymmetry within a segment larger than Metz's classification allows for.

1. *The sea*. As indicated in the foregoing reading, the image of the sea is used symmetrically to mark the beginning and end of the film and the turning-point of its action. But this is not to be seen as a mere formal device, *mere* pattern-making: at the outset of the film (segment 3) the sea is invested with a specific metaphysical meaning ('deceptiveness of appearances,' etc.) which has resonances throughout a film in which nothing is what it seems, and in which most of the main characters (Paul, Jessica, Mrs. Rand, Betsy herself) turn out to be ambiguous in various ways.

2. *Night/Day*. The most obvious structuring principle operating across the film as a whole is the alternation of day and night. Clearly, this has its significance in relation to the film's complex structure of 'symbolic' oppositions indicated in the 'reading' above (Canada/West Indies, white/black, science/witchcraft, Christianity/voodoo, conscious/unconscious, etc. . . .). The alternation can be set forth as follows (the numbers refer of course to the segments in the reading):

Day:	1, 2, 4, 5,	11-16,	18	22,	24, 25,	34,	40,
Night:	3	6-10,	17,	19-21,	23,	26-33,	35-39, 41-46

It will be obvious that the alternation is neither consistent nor symmetrical; the imbalance takes on great resonance in relation to the overall thematic and dramatic movement of the film. In the earlier part, there is a fairly even distribution of day and night scenes; in the later part, night progressively takes over. From segment 26 (the departure for the hounfort, very strongly marked as the film's only true sequence-shot), only 2 of the 21 segments are set in daylight.

3. *Symmetry within a larger segment*. The formal principles of symmetry, alternation, repetition operate within classical Hollywood cinema at all levels. The arrangement of shots within an individual sequence will show a frequent tendency to a rough symmetry. An example from *I Walked With a Zombie* chosen at random: segment 3 (the ship), composed of 13 shots, begins and ends by cross-cutting between Paul and Betsy in isolation, separated on the boat; the central shot (No. 7) is both (a) by far the longest take in the sequence and (b) the shot in which Paul moves into Betsy's space, so that they are in frame together.

Here, however, I want briefly to indicate the tendency to symmetry over a larger segment than a single sequence. I have chosen the visit to the hounfort, because it is the core of the film. The segment divides between four (continuous) locations, which we may identify as follows:

A. The garden of Fort Holland.

- B. The canefields.
- C. The site of the ceremony (dance).
- D. The interior of the hounfort.

From segment 26 to segment 33 (inclusive), this gives us the progression A B C D C B A. The central movement (in certain aspects, central to the whole film), the revelation of Mrs. Rand's position, is marked further (within a segment predominantly characterized by darkness) by the abrupt switching-on of a lamp. (It will be noticed that the symmetrical use of locations is qualified by the asymmetry of duration: the recurrence of locations C and B after D is much briefer than their initial appearance).

## Appendix II: The operation of the codes.

**W**E CAN, FINALLY, DRAW SOME CONCLUSIONS from our tracing of the four codes throughout the film (though the reading of a complex work can never really be concluded).

First, the two linear codes (Proairetic, Hermeneutic): they are dominant (though not always to the same degree) in every classical Hollywood film, whose first aim and duty has always been *to tell a story*. Every story, and every telling, depends for its success on the logic of its chain of actions and the maintaining of interest and curiosity through its chain of enigmas. It is not quite possible to imagine a narrative film that entirely lacks a semantic/symbolic structure: as soon as you introduce a good character and a bad character you have the beginnings of one, and even the most childish and simple 'B' western will produce its set of oppositions (*good* cowboy wears *white* hat, rides *white* horse, *bad* cowboy wears *black* hat, rides *black* horse, etc.). But on that rudimentary and banal level, the only interest of the film is likely to be on the level of what-happens-next (usually quite predictable, also). One might venture the proposition that, the richer and more complex the semantic/symbolic structure, the finer the film.

At the same time, the linear codes represent—in the overwhelming majority of cases—the *conscious* level of Hollywood film-making: even the greatest Hollywood directors (for example, Ford and Hawks) tend to discuss their films predominantly in terms of the story, the action, the characters, apparently being (at most) only vaguely aware of the semantic/symbolic dimension of their work. What is also crucially important is that it is on the level of the linear codes that Hollywood films have always been most vulnerable to censorship in various forms (from studio decisions to the strictures of the Motion Picture Production code, elaborated to guard against subversion of the dominant norms of society in any form), simply because that is the level of which censorship is conscious, the level that must be seen to conform to the demands of 'the dominant ideology.' In the Hollywood film, then, the level of the linear codes—roughly, the level of the 'plot'—is likely to be (superficially, at least) conservative, the 'restoration of order' at the end being the restoration of the *status quo*, patriarchy and the conventional morality that serves it.

One can see this clearly (and typically) in *I Walked with a Zombie*. We have specified the 'dominant action' as the development of the Paul/Betsy relationship, and the 'dominant enigma' as the problem of Jessica (her illness, its cause, its nature, what can be done with her?). One can trace, through the reading of the film offered, the interdependence of the two and their perfect correlation at the end: with Jessica at last dead, and her enigma explained, Paul and Betsy can embrace.



To put it another way: the film moves, in a way paralleled in countless other narratives, towards the elimination of the 'bad couple' (Wesley, Jessica), who have transgressed the patriarchal moral code, in order finally to construct the 'good couple' (Paul, Betsy).

What interests me here above all is the ambiguity of the relationship between the operation of the linear codes and that of the semantic/symbolic structure, which supposedly sustains them but in fact undermines them: I want to claim that the whole linear progress of the film towards its apparently conformist, conventional, reactionary resolution, effectively collapses under the weight of semantic/symbolic implication. One can suggest how this comes about by listing the dominant themes that are established, reiterated and developed:

deceptiveness of appearances, uncertainty of motivation, oppression (on many levels, in many forms), female transgression . . .

etc., etc. . . . .

and by tabulating the intricate structure of binary oppositions indicated as forming the film's symbolic structure:

Canada	West Indies
white	black (race)
white	black (clothing)
day	night
science	witchcraft
Christianity	voodoo
home (Fort)	houmfort
light	darkness
conscious	unconscious
harp, piano	voodoo drums
rationalism	superstition

etc., etc. . . .

One must then go on to indicate (as I have done in the reading of the film) how the apparently clearcut nature of the oppositions (in a *simple* narrative they would be reducible to 'good'—left-hand column—and 'evil'—right-hand column) is systematically undermined as the film progresses, so that all moral certitude is lost; and also to indicate how all this affects our reading of the characters and their actions. I suggest here a few points where linear and non-linear codes intersect.

1. *Jessica's illness*. We are clearly meant to take explanation *vi* (Mrs. Rand's confession) as the 'correct' one, yet it is clear that it complements rather than disqualifies the preceding ones: Jessica was engaged in an adulterous affair with Wesley; she and Paul had a violent argument in which he said terrible things to her; she fell ill, succumbing to a tropical fever; only then was Mrs. Rand able to intervene. In other words, *all* the family are implicated in Jessica's condition.

2. *Betsy*. Signified heavily as the 'pure,' 'innocent' heroine ('clean, decent thinking,' etc.), Betsy is in fact drawn into the web of moral ambiguity (repeatedly suggested *visually*, by the intricate lighting effects): the insulin shock treatment and visit to the houmfort (both of which she has been assured are extremely dangerous) can be read as (unconscious) attempts to eliminate Jessica, not save her.

3. *Paul*. Interestingly, one enigma is left conspicuously unresolved, what one might call the chicken-and-egg question of Paul's character; certain elements in the film suggest that he became bitter and cynical because of his wife's infidelity, others suggest (more emphatically and more convincingly) that he was always like that (which can be read as the motivation for Jessica's desire to run away with Wesley). The film's nominal 'happy ending' in no way *guarantees* happiness: as Betsy and Jessica are frequently paralleled in the film, we are free to believe that Betsy's fate will be similar to that of her deceased patient.

4. *The Voodoo patches*. The cane-field sequences associate the women's protective voodoo patches with the recurrent theme of ambiguity (white on black, black on white). But this is taken up in the visual motif that runs through the film: Betsy's watch pendant, the brooch she gives to the baby (segment 24), the pocket handkerchiefs, of which Mrs. Rand's (40) and Paul's (41) are especially prominent, all figure as subtle reminders of the transgression of boundaries, the uncertainty of accepted values.

5. *Ti-Misery*. Arguably, the central symbolic image around which the whole film is organized. Introduced in segment 5 (by verbal reference), he is visually prominent in segments 6, 10, 26, 43, and 46. Combining white Christian saint and black slave, he becomes a generalized image of oppression, transgressing the boundaries between the film's oppositions: it is fitting that the film ends with a tracking-shot in on him.

## Footnotes

1. An example ready to hand is an essay on *The Pirate* ("Vision, Desire and the Film Text") in *Camera Obscura* 6. Extreme but not altogether untypical is the author's definition of the fiction film as 'a textual mode which privileges the scopic and the auditory.' Translation: 'Films are seen and heard.'
2. See, in particular, Julia Lesage's analysis of *La Règle du Jeu* in *Jump Cut*, preceded by Judith Mayne's explication of the codes.
3. For those unfamiliar with Ophüls' film, the content of the first shot is as follows: A rainy night in a cobbled city street; a horse-drawn carriage is approaching in long-shot; the caption "Vienna, about 1900" appears over the image; a clock is striking two. As the carriage draws near and stops outside iron gates, the camera moves in so as to frame the man who gets out (Stefan/Louis Jourdan) in the rectangle of the far window. Brief dialogue with the two men who remain inside the carriage: "So you're going through with it?" Stefan (shrugs): "Why not?" "Well, for one thing I hear he's an excellent shot." Stefan: "Oh, it's not so much that I mind getting killed. But you know how hard it is for me to get up in the morning." One of the men tells him that they will return at five o'clock, adding "And if I were you, no more cognac." The carriage continues on its way, and we see Stefan approaching the gates.
4. The '*Grande Syntagmatique*' was Metz's attempt to construct a syntax of the narrative film, specifying the possible types of sequence (or syntagma). Its usefulness is very limited (problems arise almost every time one tries to apply it), but it has provided a rough means of breaking a film down into its 'autonomous segments.' Only a few of Metz's categories are relevant to *I Walked with a Zombie*: the *scene* is a sequence in which the action is perfectly continuous in time and space, without ellipses; the *ordinary sequence* is like the scene but omits stretches of time unnecessary to the narrative (e.g. the walk through the cane-fields, segment 28). These two syntagmas account for most of the segments into which I have divided the film. There is also a *descriptive syntagma* (No. 6), a sequence of shots outside any clear chronological progress establishing a location, etc.; a *sequence shot* (No. 26) in which an action that might normally require a sequence is filmed in a single take; and an *alternate syntagma* (I prefer 'alternating sequence,' No. 31), in which two actions taking place in different locations are intercut.
5. The *diegesis* is the complete fictional world created within the film, its illusion of reality, including for example the action, the characters, the settings, atmosphere, realistic detail . . .

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This article is dedicated to the memory of Ed Lowry, a critic of exceptional promise, who died last October. We had hoped to enlist him as a contributor.

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# Feminist Film Theory and Social Reality

by Florence Jacobowitz

**I**F I WERE ASKED TO DEFINE feminist theory, I would first suggest that it is concerned with both understanding the sources and perpetuation of oppression related to the rigid division of gender<sup>1</sup> (and gender roles) in a society, and with investigating strategies of social change: i.e. articulating a course of change in a real, 'material' world. I would stress that the ultimate goal of analysing social and cultural conditions is political action.

Further thinking would lead me to declare what many more astute thinkers have already discerned—that feminism involves an immense epistemological upheaval: rewriting, rethinking and reinterpreting the world from a feminist perspective. Given that most people have been educated and socialized in a patriarchal, class-structured and racist society, feminism requires an entire reorientation—learning new ways of seeing, thinking, evaluating and representing. Implicit in this perception of feminist theory is the belief that there is a knowable social world that is mutable and changes. In other words, the current 'dominant' ideology is only currently dominant and assumptions regarding sexuality, family groupings, kinship systems, the organization of the state, vary in different historical periods. The definition outlined above also assumes that one (an individual or group) *can* learn to see, to 'read,' to interpret, and hence to reject and choose alternatives. The potential for transformation exists in both the personal and the social/comunal realms. I am suggesting that consciousness-raising (to use a currently untrendy, passé term which implies something significantly different from 'deconstruction,' as will soon be discussed) is one of the key elements linking theory to action, and this involves the possibility of both critically distancing oneself from the entanglements of

entrenched political values, morals, ethics, and beliefs, and conceiving of alternatives.

Theoretical discussions of ideology and its effects on culture and society are often unsatisfactory in that they seem too abstract and difficult to prove or to refute. There exists a great deal of tension and ambivalence (which is difficult to footnote) regarding the importance of contemporary cultural theory and, in many respects, it deserves this reputation. It often appears elitist, locked in increasingly, purposely obscurantist rhetoric, and, worst of all, divorced from the here and now. Its ultimate destiny seems to be scholarly journals or university dissertations—a solipsistic, self-referential practice. Before pursuing these allegations further, it seems pertinent to outline my arguments for the inclusion of popular culture and art in feminist/socialist strategies. (I am referring to popular mainstream 'entertainment' and am avoiding the pornography/censorship debate as it is an aspect of popular culture which does receive a great deal of feminist attention.<sup>2</sup>) To begin, it is in the sphere of entertainment (predominantly film, video and television) that notions of gender roles and familial structures are set up, and where cultural tensions and conflicts are acted out. While I do not have the statistics at hand, one could reasonably argue that for a certain age group (approximately ranging from the fifteen to thirty year olds who make up the bulk of these audiences) popular forms of entertainment have eclipsed other sources of socialization (like the education system and perhaps even the nuclear family) in terms of providing figures of identification and information on how gender is socially defined. They provide fascinating resource material for understanding how images are propagated and entrenched and why women collude with patriarchal representations of female experience. Simone de Beau-

voir was perhaps the first to appreciate that oppression is reinforced through popular myths of romantic love and marriage—the stuff and substance of popular narrative art.

Aside from the potentially negative functions of film and TV (perpetuating patriarchal concepts of gender and slyly naturalizing regressive ideological 'norms'), the extreme popularity of fictional narrative entertainment for both adolescents and adults suggests that there are other functions, and other needs being satisfied. Popular culture provides an arena for the release of 'utopian' visions,<sup>3</sup> of needs, desires and forms of pleasure which can never be entirely controlled by forms of censorship. As Terry Lovell writes, there are many forms of public and social pleasures which can be utilized in radical strategies; "pleasures of common experiences identified and celebrated in art, and through this celebration, given recognition and validation; pleasures of solidarity to which this sharing may give rise; pleasure in shared and socially defined aspirations and hopes; in a sense of identity and community."<sup>4</sup>

One of the most important feminist strategies involves making previously unacknowledged experiences visible, and claiming these experiences to be political. Ignoring popular culture and entertainment, or considering it peripheral to the more pressing issues (predominantly economic and reproductive) is precisely in line with patriarchal ideology. Our society's dominant attitude towards entertainment suggests that the fundamental desires, pleasures, frustrations which are evoked, are inconsequential and ultimately unrelated to 'real' life. Criticism and analysis is discouraged because it is politically preferable to be able to control, and hence diffuse, the conflicts, anxieties, and tensions enacted through narrative art. Andrew Britton develops this thesis in a discussion of what he terms "Reaganite







entertainment." The films he analyzes insist on their fantasy element in order "to avoid exposing the incoherence or stimulating the very anxieties which it is the film's function to lay to rest."<sup>5</sup> By demeaning pleasure as 'just entertainment,' as not related to *real* anxieties and dissatisfaction, these films provide a place to let off steam that might otherwise be directed and mobilised. By adopting the attitude that cultural forms of play and pleasure are trivial, and ultimately unrelated to politics, feminists risk falling prey to the most basic operations of co-optation practised by the dominant ideology. Britton points out that "significant art," on the other hand, "informs us of the network of social relations out there, related to the ideas, feelings 'in here' . . . and transforms or reinvents the possibilities of reference . . . . The text transforms the ways in which we are able to conceive of a social reality external to it . . . ."<sup>6</sup>

It is at this point that we can return to the discussion of contemporary cultural theory. If one hopes to use art to help "reformulate conditions of experience—in order to change them . . ."<sup>7</sup> then a feminist's wholesale adoption of many (supposedly radical) structuralist and post-structuralist semiotic discourse theories (including the reinterpretation of psychoanalysis and Marxist theory) is problematic to say the least. Although I don't have the space to argue through all of the objections which have been made, I would like to outline some of the major problems since these theories so centrally inform much feminist film theory.

Feminists have (understandably) been attracted to discourse theory, to the concept that power is maintained through language and to the idea that subject identity (hence gender) is interdependent with language and discourse. Althusser and Lacan, in their respective disciplines, have been the chief proponents of the idea that language and discourse *determines* social identity, experience and knowledge. They borrow from Saussure's theories of language the notion that language is understood through the perception of differences, and the conceptual categories through which differences are articulated and understood are profoundly ideological. (For example, woman is perceived as not male—relegated to the realm of the 'Other.') Also, signs can connote various

levels of meaning; for example, the image of a woman signifies a plethora of connotations in a patriarchal discourse: castrated other, lost mother, sexual seductress, etc., hence new signs are created which are specific to a particular culture. The speaking subject, then, is constructed (and hence controlled) by language and therefore, by ideology. One can at best deconstruct parts of the system, uncover some of the inconsistencies and find the cracks, but one can never altogether step outside of discourse. Quoting post-Althusserians like Hindess and Hirst, Terry Lovell makes the point that " . . . it is then no longer possible to refer to objects existing *outside* of discourse as the measure of validity of discourse."<sup>8</sup> "What differentiates realism from this absurdly consistent conventionalism is precisely its insistence that, while concepts draw their meaning from their place within a system of concepts, these concepts can and do *refer* to real objects in a real world, about which things can be said and known."<sup>9</sup> By excluding subjective experience, and a 'subject' who can act outside of ideological discourse and refer to an extra-discursive world, the Althusserian school effectively denies the possibility of challenging the dominant ideology from an individual or collective basis.

This same criticism has been raised in relation to the work of Michel Foucault. Although Foucault's theorization of the discourses of power implies the existence of resistance, he explains that "resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power." Jeffrey Weeks makes this point stating that "the very existence of power relies on a multiplicity of points of resistance which play the role of 'adversary, target, support or handle in power relations.' It is difficult to resist the conclusion—which Foucault actually denies—that the techniques of discipline and surveillance, of individuation, and the strategies of power-knowledge that subject us, leave us always trapped." He notes further, a "latent essentialism" in his work in that Foucault's theory seems to imply that "if we break out of the regime of sexuality then power will play through a new series of discourses."<sup>10</sup> Once again, this seems to deny the possibility of ever effecting social change.

The use of Lacanian psychoanalysis compounds this inability to challenge governing ideological 'norms' as it claims that the child's initiation into language is an inexorable, determined trajectory which begins in what Lacan terms the mirror phase—a *pre-Oedipal* stage of ego development. As Mark Pos-

ter points out, according to Lacan, "language is given primacy over social structures."<sup>11</sup> At least Freud's model of the creation of the gendered subject from its initial bisexual nature depends upon social practices—the Oedipus complex, the incest taboo, the patriarchal family. The Lacanian version of the construction of the subject, (the process wherein the ego is constituted), which treats each subject as an undifferentiated *male* subject, begins in the mirror phase when a child misrecognizes itself in the mirror as being more complete than s/he is (the child sees itself united with the mother). As Laura Mulvey explains,

recognition is thus overlaid with misrecognition: the image recognized is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego, the alienated subject, which, re-introjected as an ego ideal, gives rise to the future generation of identification with others. The mirror moment predates language for the child.<sup>12</sup>

Yet the child also experiences his/(her) ability to make the image disappear. This initial experience of alienation, separation, absence (and potential death) is the first time the child experiences a split in this unity—the recognition of a lack, of absence, of division, sets the stage for language and creates desire. The child forever tries to return to being united with the elusive mother, and desires to fill in 'the lack' which has been created. These repressions which take place, these memory-traces of the absence of the object of desire are part of what forms the unconscious. Unlike Freud, Lacan claims that the unconscious is structured like a language; as Annette Kuhn explains, it is "formed in the same process in which the subject is produced: that is, in the acquisition of language."<sup>13</sup>

The mirror phase precedes the child's acquisition of language and his/her entry into the 'Symbolic' order (the Oedipal phase). As Juliet Mitchell writes,

It will be some time before the baby acquires all the signifying terms—the basic structure of language. When it does, two of these terms are masculinity and femininity, related as signifying terms by their difference. As they are related by their difference, some further signifying term must mark the difference—a difference that says they can never be the same as each other. It is the phallus—with all the connotations of such a term as are found in its ancient usage—that is the signifying mark of the distinction between the sexes . . . . It is the mark of difference and as such is 'discovered' by the infant when it is found to be *absent* in the mother.<sup>14</sup>

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*The Scarlet Empress: Dietrich and the foregrounding of 'masculinity.'*



The privileged signifier of language (and gender identification) is the phallus. The phallus is the prime bearer of meaning as it establishes the concept of sexual difference (who has the phallus and who doesn't) in a determinedly phallogocentric culture. The mother, once signifying comfort, plenitude and wholeness, now also connotes fearful castration (for the male subject), the powerless Other. She recedes (consciously) in importance as the father takes over as an active figure of identification. The subject, throughout life, is tempted and continually constituted by other mirrors which reactivate the mirror stage of the Imaginary preceding the traumas of sexual difference—mirrors which offer imaginary reflections of wholeness and control (which is what ideology does). The dominant ideology maintains its power by offering false, deceptive and soothing mirror images of coherence and unity (through the family, religion, the state) while supporting and reinforcing the 'correct' figures of identification (the law of the Father). (The cinematic screen has been compared to one such mirror<sup>15</sup> as it reactivates the mechanisms of the imaginary—the erotic fascination involved in looking, specularly, recognition/misrecognition and identification.) As Lovell points out, according to Lacan "the self is nothing but the combined product of these imaginary reflections, and as inconsistent as they are." It becomes difficult to reconcile this theory with any concept of class struggle which "reinforces a constituting subject, collective rather than individual, which is capable of informed intervention . . ."<sup>16</sup> All one can talk about is an 'interpellated' subject doomed to misperception.

Perhaps what might be described as the backbone of all contemporary feminist film theory is Laura Mulvey's article on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Mulvey's account of how the cinema addresses and constructs a masculine, gendered spectator by instigating erotic forms of specularly is based on Lacan's linguistic reinterpretation of Freudian psychoanalysis. She outlines the importance of this type of analysis for feminists by claiming,

It gets us nearer to the roots of our oppression, it brings an articulation of the problem closer, it faces us with the ultimate challenge: how to fight the unconscious structured like a language (formed critically at the moment of the arrival of language) while still caught within the language of patriarchy.<sup>17</sup>

If one's goal is social change, beyond deconstruction, then what Mulvey describes (given the theoretical parameters

of her methodology) is less the ultimate challenge, than the ultimate paradox. How can one fight a system which is instilled *before* the entry into ideology—i.e. into the family, into kinship systems and all other facets of socialization? How can one change to another system of discourse (which is what Mulvey proposes: a return to zero, a new language of desire) when one is locked, both conceptually and perceptually, within patriarchal discourse?

It is, nevertheless, worth outlining Mulvey's influential thesis as some of it is recuperable from its Lacanian confines. Mulvey explains that cinematic pleasure is created and maintained by the manner in which it recalls "pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have molded him."<sup>18</sup> By linking primal erotic forms of looking (evoking memories of satisfaction and pleasure as well as memory-traces of 'lack' linked to the Imaginary stage) to socially-defined notions of sexual difference (the Symbolic), the Hollywood cinema unshakably reinforces dominant patriarchal definitions of gender. The experience of viewing a motion picture within the surroundings of the darkened theatre sets the stage for the above operation. More than any other 'conscious' experience, films recreate a kind of dream state whereby one is invited, in part, to lose oneself in a narrative world meticulously recreated onscreen—in a world which is, at once, larger than life yet safely separate. As already mentioned, the cinematic screen has been compared to one of various 'mirrors' that help constitute and define the spectating subject. Through the form of the realist fictional narrative, the spectator is situated at the centre of a unified, coherent, closed universe, led through the story by an invisible, omnipotent all-knowing masculine enunciating narrative voice (inaudible yet present).

To extend the screen/mirror analogy further, one might note that the cinema allows a space for pleasurable phantasies to be acted out. Mitchell argues that when the baby acquires language, it unconsciously maintains

a memory-trace signifying satisfaction but is left to satisfy itself from its own phantasies. In psychoanalytic terminology, a phantasy is an imaginary scene in which the subject is the protagonist and in which, in distorted manner, a wish is fulfilled. Phantasy is the setting for the desire (wish) which came into being with its prohibition (absence of object). The baby, or any human subject of whatever age, places himself as actor somewhere in the

scene. (One can easily verify this structure from one's own day-dreams.) The place the subject occupies is unfixed and even invisible being de-subjectivised as often in dreams. Phantasies are scripts capable of dramatisation, usually in visual form.<sup>19</sup>

It is interesting to note how easily the terms used to describe phantasy lend themselves to the cinematic situation—a scene or setting, where one acts out dramatised scripts in visual form.

According to Mulvey, the act of spectating depends on

two contradictory aspects of the pleasurable structures of looking in the conventional cinematic situation. The first, scopophilic, arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. The second, developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen. Thus, in film terms, one implies a separation of the erotic identity of the subject from the object on the screen (active scopophilia), the other demands identification of the ego with the object on the screen through the spectator's fascination with and recognition of his like.<sup>20</sup>

Women, then, are coded as erotic objects 'to-be-looked-at.' Their visual image "freeze(s) the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation"<sup>21</sup> (both for the spectator and for his figure of identification, the male character within the diegesis) while the male character of identification controls the action and moves the story along. As Robin Wood once noted, (interpreting Mulvey) "the male carries the narrative forward while the woman holds it up."<sup>22</sup> However, the woman's image does not simply, unproblematically, satisfy male pleasure and desire. As Mulvey explains, "the look, pleasurable in form, can be threatening in content, and it is woman as representation/image that crystallizes this paradox."<sup>23</sup> Although the woman recalls an early memory of 'plenitude,' she comes to signify sexual difference—the castrated Other.

The paradox of phallogocentrism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world. An idea of woman stands as lynch-pin to the system: it is her lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence, it is her desire to make good the lack that the phallus signifies.<sup>24</sup>

As Mulvey outlines, "the male unconscious has two avenues of escape from this castration anxiety."<sup>25</sup> The male spectator can demystify the female Other,



and then punish or save the guilty object through voyeurism, or disavow castration by fetishizing woman so that she becomes reassuring instead of dangerous (through fetishistic scopophilia). Mulvey accounts for the over-valuation of female stars as a manifestation of the latter.

Many feminist film theoreticians reiterate Mulvey's theories without considering the two examples she mentions to illustrate and validate her assertions. It is in this section of her discussion that serious doubts arise. Whereas one can describe Hitchcock's *Vertigo* as a film wherein the male star tries to control and remold a woman who may well evoke castration anxieties, one cannot confidently assert that Hitchcock's film situates the spectator on John/Scottie's (James Stewart) side through processes of identification. As Mulvey herself notes,

In *Vertigo* erotic involvement with the look is disorientating: the spectator's fascination is turned against him as the narrative carries him through and entwines him with the processes that he is himself exercising . . . The spectator . . . sees through the look and finds himself exposed as complicit,

caught in the moral ambiguity of looking . . . *Vertigo* focuses on the implications of the active/looking, passive/looked-at split in terms of sexual difference and the power of the male symbolic encapsulated in the hero.<sup>26</sup>

Mulvey fails to mention that by the latter half of the film, one also identifies with the female protagonist (Judy/Madeleine, played by Kim Novak.) Far from endorsing masculine forms of erotic looking, the film presents a severe critique of various forms of patriarchal domination and allows for critical distance. Mulvey admits that "Hitchcock uses the process of identification normally associated with ideological correctness and the recognition of established morality and shows up its perverted side."<sup>27</sup> This seems to call into question Mulvey's final comments suggesting the need to build a 'counter-cinema' outside of traditional forms.

Similarly, while one may contend that Dietrich is fetishized and 'overvalued' as an erotic 'object' of the spectator/director's desire, her persona is far too complex to be reductively described in this way. One of the outstanding characteristics of the Dietrich persona is irony—she *knows* how men perceive her

and the characters she plays use this knowledge to assert their needs and desires. Many of von Sternberg's films foreground the male characters' attempts to possess and control Dietrich's sexuality (*The Devil is a Woman*, *The Scarlet Empress* amongst others) while she eludes masculine domination. The films draw attention to the woman's disempowered position and to her very limited forms of protest. Whereas Mulvey maintains that, "shadowy characters like La Bessière in *Morocco* act as surrogates for the director, detached as they are from audience identification,"<sup>28</sup> one can also argue that the director deeply identifies with Dietrich's oppression within a patriarchally defined social world. Finally, Mulvey fails to theorize how the female spectator responds to stars like Dietrich—beyond assuming a masculine form of looking.

Since Mulvey suggests that oppressive forms of masculine pleasure are built into the spectating process itself and are intrinsic to traditional film conventions, she calls for a complete rejection of the "traditional film form" and of the kinds of pleasure generated by that form, even though she indicates a few paragraphs earlier that traditional realist films like

*Blonde Venus*: Dietrich with the *vagina dentata*.







Hitchcock and the foregrounding of male domination . . .

*Vertigo* can work to distance the viewer from the male figure of identification in order to highlight his oppressive behaviour. If this is the case, then it implies the possibility of establishing other forms of looking, for example analytic, (not unlike her call for "passionate detachment")<sup>29</sup> within traditional realist cinema. The act of viewing is *not* inherently ideological. Realist art can allow the spectating audience to maintain a certain distance by *presenting* a critique or through the use of irony.

Juliet Mitchell makes this point with reference to Emily Brontë (and others have argued the same thing in relation to George Eliot, Jane Austen, Edith Wharton and many other significant female authors working within the realist narrative mode),

. . . she is clearly working within the terms of a language which has been defined as phallogentric. Yet she is, through a kind of irony, posing questions about patriarchal organization . . .<sup>30</sup>

and she proceeds to outline the critical position Brontë maintains. In other

words, the forms traditionally defined or usurped by patriarchal ideology may be effectively used for other purposes—i.e. a severe critique of a traditional position.

A major blank space in Mulvey's theory of visual pleasure involves the female position. It is a fairly significant blank space in Lacanian psychoanalysis as well: Why is the phallus meaningful and why is the female sexual organ less valuable? (Luce Irigaray tries to combat one privileged signifier by substituting another, hence the 'two lips' theory.) How is the female initiated into the 'Symbolic'? What is female desire all about? In terms of the cinema one might ask, how does the female spectator achieve pleasure? According to Mulvey's theory, elaborated in her response to this 'lack' in her original article,<sup>31</sup> the female position within this system is problematic. She can either adopt masculine or active forms of looking, and identify with both male and female protagonists (arousing her repressed activeness/masculinity) or masochistically identify with the passive female 'object,' trapped within the power of the male gaze and the rules of patriarchal society. Mulvey

uses the example of *Duel in the Sun* where an active female protagonist (Pearl/Jennifer Jones) is unable to repress her activeness/masculinity and establish a stable sexual identity. She compares these conflicting desires to those experienced by the female spectator. However, this does not seem adequate in accounting for the intensity of female pleasure provided through popular narrative forms and through identification with stars.

In a recent lecture<sup>32</sup> Mulvey herself outlined some of the problems with her original position. She discussed the dangers of polarizing 'difference' into opposites (active/masculine vs. passive/feminine) without challenging the metaphoric base that establishes sexual difference. She maintained that this kind of dualism leaves opposites unable to meet and also makes it difficult to fit in alternative discourses.

This seems to be one of the major traps some of the French feminists have encountered in their attempts to define feminine speech. (Again, they do not significantly challenge the self-referential nature of discourse theory or the deter-





... *Vertigo*, with James Stewart and Kim Novak.

minism of Lacanian psychoanalysis.) As Luce Irigaray notes, "the unconscious is structured like a language, he (Lacan) claims repeatedly. Obviously, but which?"<sup>33</sup> The female voice has been defined as being a disruptive force outside of organized discourse, occupying the realm of the pre-Oedipal, the 'semiotic,' the carnivalesque, the poetic. Irigaray specifically discusses the creation of female speech based on a new signifier of meaning—the vaginal two lips. Kristeva, unlike Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, "does not distinguish the female impulse (le féminin) from other polymorphous manifestations of negativity and dissidence."<sup>34</sup> If in fact, the feminine describes the pre-Oedipal, and if the pre-Oedipal can be separate from the Oedipal (which is in itself a contentious point—I have argued that this is doubtful, that the initiation into language in the Imaginary stage cannot be divorced from the acquisition of language) then the feminine refers to a point in a child's development preceding sexual difference; i.e. a time when the child's gendered sexuality is not yet determined, its bisexual period. If this is true then the

'feminine' describes everything not 'masculine,' for example a 'homosexual' voice. This is Kristeva's position. Why, however, call it 'feminine'?

Juliet Mitchell argues that the pre-Oedipal, the carnivalesque, *cannot* be the area of the feminine.

It is just what the patriarchal universe defines as the feminine, the intuitive, the religious, the mystical, the playful, all those things that have been assigned to women—the heterogeneous, the notion that women's sexuality is much more one of a whole body, not so genital, not so phallic. It is not that the carnival cannot be disruptive of the law; but it disrupts only within the terms of that law.<sup>35</sup>

Mitchell sees the pre-Oedipal as a moment "provided by the law, by the symbolic law itself," and not a "separate structure in its own right."<sup>36</sup> The claim that the pre-Oedipal is exclusively feminine is a patriarchal view.

Irigaray, who does seek to define feminine language, risks these same pitfalls of mystification. Her 'two lips' theory of feminine speech is set up opposite masculine discourse which she describes as

being fixed, symmetrical, closed. Feminine language, on the other hand, is multiple, fluid, open, polyvalent. Kristeva similarly maintains the categories of masculine vs. feminine (i.e. not masculinity), by claiming that the 'female modality,' the 'semiotic,' the disruptive, transgressive, voice represents a negativity. She writes,

a female praxis can only be negative, an opposition to what exists, in order to say, 'that is not it,' 'that is still not it'. I mean by 'female' what is not represented, what is not said, what remains outside of nominations and ideologies.<sup>37</sup>

Andrew Britton elaborates upon the objections raised to these classifications of femininity (and it seems worth quoting at length):

There is, at this point, a very romantic identification of madness with 'poetic language', as the 'primary example' of the crisis of difference, and of both with the 'feminine'. This model of feminism, which also underlies the films of Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey, seems to me most dangerous in its implications. As right-on, together,



liberated, political beings, we have abandoned the notion of the unfathomable mystery of Woman, only to see it replaced by the 'the voice of the Sphinx' (referring to Mulvey/Wollen's film, *Riddles of the Sphinx*)—the Feminine as the 'unspoken and the unspeakable', the Freudian 'dark continent', the voice of the poet and the madman, a mysterious, repressed, volcanic life-force. Kristeva's argument, in fact, merely grafts 'the eternal feminine' on to a collection of romantic/anarchist stereotypes—the wise fool, the daemonic poet, the spontaneous disruption of social forms—and then offers the result as sexual politics. While both are clearly comprehensible as a response to oppression, the 'feminine' as here described seems to me as illusory as the 'gay sensibility'; and in Kristeva's definition of the 'Feminine', which is essentially mythic (it is eternal and ahistorical), psychoanalysis has become little more than a means of reinforcing the most cherished dreams of Romanticism.<sup>38</sup>

Aside from the claim that both feminists succumb to mystification, one must outline an additional problem. Irigaray, Kristeva and Mulvey, amongst others, are talking about both masculine modes of discourse (i.e. form, style, language) and questions of content (i.e. ideological notions of gender and female experiences which are not represented), and the two are not the same. Formally these feminists call for an oppositional language (in the cinema it has been dubbed 'counter cinema')<sup>39</sup> a modernist text (as opposed to a realist one) which is not 'symmetrical' or closed, etc. As I argue at length elsewhere,<sup>40</sup> there are many 'texts' which are open, polyvalent, etc. yet still speak with a 'masculine' i.e. patriarchal voice, still present the point of view of patriarchal, 'masculine' experience (whether by a male or female artist: Jean-Luc Godard's *Sauve Qui Peut, La Vie/Slow Motion* is a case in point.) There are realist texts which obey formal laws of symmetry and closure yet are *politically* feminist in the sense of being sensitive to the oppression of women, or of representing alternative suppressed experiences, or of exploring feminine pleasure (and I would go so far as to claim that they do so consciously). This appears to be more defensible when considering a film directed by a woman sympathetic to women's issues, like Lee Grant's *Tell Me a Riddle*; however even a male director like Max Ophüls, admittedly working outside of a feminist framework, has directed films like *Caught* or *The Reckless Moment* that speak to women in a manner that does not compromise spectatorial forms of visual pleasure. Why is symmetry, as Irigaray argues, a *mascu-*

*line* construct? The goal of the female speculum is to shatter what she terms "the old dream of symmetry."<sup>41</sup> *Patriarchal* order and the use of closure as a means of sealing the omniscient patriarchal voice is offensive. Symmetry as a formal device is not, in itself, ideological, and there is no reason why aesthetic and formal pleasures cannot be appropriated for more politically satisfying ends.

A further objection to much current feminist cultural work is its ahistorical, apolitical nature (which is also, in part, attributable to its borrowing from the various discourse theories discussed earlier as well as Lacanian psychoanalysis). There is no sense of class, of history, of context, of age, of ethnicity or of race. As Terry Lovell notes,

The relations of labour/capital are in danger of being reduced to the revolt of the son against the Father, a reductionism no more acceptable than the economism which Althusser and his followers were at such pains to avoid.<sup>42</sup>

A case in point: in her recent collection of essays on "Women and Film," E. Ann Kaplan includes a critical discussion of Margarethe Von Trotta's *Marianne and Juliane*. Although she does go on vaguely to situate the film within a cultural and historical context, she begins her discussion in this manner:

While Marguerite Duras explores the possibility of women remaining with the world of the imaginary, refusing the male symbolic order as far as is possible, Von Trotta analyses women's political discourses within the symbolic realm. She shows her heroines trying to survive by constructing either a discourse of violence against the dominant order (terrorism) or one that seeks to effect change within it (reformist feminism).<sup>43</sup>

This introduction speaks for itself (through the Lacanian seal of approval) and to itself. In addition, describing terrorism as a discursive practice denies its relationship to events in a particular, historical, social world. Kaplan also takes great pains to read the film in Lacanian terms. Even though, she claims, "Von Trotta refuses to psychoanalyze the sisters," Kaplan cannot resist accounting for Marianne's terrorist activities: "It is clear that Marianne's intense identification with her father has resulted in her taking a self-destructive path."<sup>44</sup>

In a further reductionist sweep, Kaplan maintains that the film (although a realist one) situates

... the female spectator very differently than do Hollywood films. In

Chapter I we saw that the repeated masochistic scenarios that characterize the family melodrama effectively immobilize the female viewer. While the male viewer is given idealized screen heroes that return the image of his more perfect self in the mirror phase, the female spectator has only powerless, victimized figures who reinforce an already established sense of worthlessness.<sup>45</sup>

Although *Marianne and Juliane* is conceived within a realist style, Kaplan feels obliged to apologize for this and recuperate the film; "One is reminded very much of the kind of realism we find in eastern European films by directors like Andrej Wajda, Marta Meszaros, Károly Makk and Pál Gábor."<sup>46</sup>

Von Trotta, like many other filmmakers sensitive to feminist politics, works to upset patriarchal definitions of gender without sacrificing the means of reaching a wide audience or the various pleasures evoked through realist fictional narratives. This is not a compromise—it is a valid strategy. These pleasures, which are culturally and historically specific, touch on needs and drives which extend beyond the strict social parameters of gender. Feminist cultural theorists must likewise expand their discussion to include wider, more flexible conceptions of gender beyond the rigid ahistorical categories which patriarchal ideology constructs and hopes to maintain.

This leads me to my concluding thoughts. I am proposing a consideration of feminist cultural theory that will venture beyond the phallus and will remain grounded in social history. The inclusion of other issues such as class, race, age, ethnicity, expands the perception of female oppression, fantasy and desire beyond sex. While the concept of Otherness is useful in understanding masculine fears and consequent attempts to control the threatening aspects of femininity, it also perpetuates the overestimation of the phallus as the central organizing force. This, then, implies the need for a discussion of sex-gender systems and gender-classes as elaborated by feminists such as Gayle Rubin and Varda Burstyn respectively. As Rubin notes

Far from being an expression of natural differences, exclusive gender identity is the suppression of natural *similarities*. It requires repression: in men, of whatever is the local version of 'feminine' traits; in women, of the local definition of 'masculine' traits. The same social system which oppresses women in its relations of exchange, oppresses everyone in its insistence upon a rigid division of personality.<sup>47</sup>



Further on she writes,

Ultimately, a thoroughgoing feminist revolution would liberate more than women. It would liberate forms of sexual expression, and it would liberate human personality from the straight jacket of gender.<sup>48</sup>

Both Rubin and Burstyn relate female oppression to larger interdependent systems of domination. Burstyn's discussion of gender-classes, as she explains,

add(s) the dimension of appropriation and domination in such a way as to include automatically and by definition a full sense of the politics of masculine dominance.<sup>49</sup>

She describes the workings of masculine dominance as

men's conscious and systematic relegation of women into an increasingly domestic space and set of functions called in our time 'the private'; and exclusion from the social space and set of functions in which men have taken charge of the life of increasingly larger numbers of people, called in our time 'the public'.<sup>50</sup>

This ghettoization of women into the powerless world of 'the private' was and remains a theme repeatedly enacted in the melodrama—a genre most obviously aiming for the female consumer. Many feminists (like Kaplan and Kristeva) have read women's pictures or the women's novel (a term which encompasses female-centred and domestic narratives across several genres—predominantly the melodrama) in terms of a 'hysteric' or 'masochistic' text—a 'text' which 'immobilises' women into submissive, ideologically correct behavior. Juliet Mitchell on the other hand, defends the importance of the woman's bourgeois novel even if it is an 'hysteric' discourse:

It is an important and impressive tradition. We have to know where women are . . . the story of their own domesticity, the story of their own seclusion within the home and the possibilities and impossibilities provided by that. This tradition has been attacked by critics such as Julia Kristeva as 'the discourse of the hysteric' . . . I believe it has to be the discourse of the hysteric . . . Hysteria is the woman's simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the organisation of sexuality under patriarchal capitalism. It is simultaneously what a woman can do both to be feminine and to refuse femininity, within patriarchal discourse.<sup>51</sup>

Even if one assumes that the filmic narrative is used to regulate potential female transgression by constructing the discourse of the woman as 'hysteric,' and

even if the classic Hollywood cinema, governed as it was by strict codes of censorship, too often imposed the less than satisfying 'happy ending,' one wonders whether women returned again and again merely to indulge their masochism. Although it is impossible to know with any certainty how the female spectator interpreted a melodrama in any given decade, it seems logical to assume, as Terry Lovell suggests,

that people do not purchase these cultural artefacts in order to expose themselves to bourgeois ideology, the 'ideological effect', but to satisfy a variety of different wants which can only be guessed at in the absence of analysis and investigation. There is no guarantee that the use-value of the cultural object for its purchaser will even be compatible with its utility to capitalism as bourgeois ideology, and therefore no guarantee that it will in fact secure 'the ideological effect'.<sup>52</sup>

Cultural products offer feminists a wealth of sociological information regarding the kinds of contradictions and ambivalences that riddle bourgeois norms and the position of the feminine. The familial 'home,' the privatized domestic space which should serve as a source of incomparable fulfillment, so often crystallizes all that the protagonists yearn to escape from, and the inability to do so capitulates the narrative crisis. This representation of the home as restrictive, oppressive and confining is repeatedly played out across various genres. One must begin to consider that realist narratives which equate the domestic sphere with enclosure and dissatisfaction are addressing a complex of social desires and emotions beyond masochism and hysteria. While one cannot make claims that classic realist art outlines strategies for social change, feminists need not dismissively reduce the viewing experience to one that 'immobilises' the spectator into ideological obedience. No matter what the intended project, there is "no guarantee that it will in fact secure the 'ideological effect'."

The work of Richard Dyer on 'stars' (*Stars*, BFI, 1978) and, for example, Andrew Britton's *Katharine Hepburn: The Thirties and After* (Tyneside Cinema Publications, 1984) begin to address these issues. Female stars function in a variety of ways, often exposing the contradictions and anxieties inherent in normative gender behavior. Stars can also act as an oppositional force, undermining the ideological demands imposed by the social world of the narrative.

Experiencing the emergence of social tensions and contradictions in a collec-

tive setting is part of the pleasures of popular culture rarely discussed. It gives one pleasure in an unconventional sense of the word—it allows people to recognize and share conflicts and experiences which are otherwise glossed over and trivialized. These kinds of pleasure are potentially transformative if recognized and mobilised.

This is why 'deconstruction' is ultimately *not* enough (and certainly not when it is an operation restricted to the privileged few). Many feminists find traditional texts useful to the extent that they provide discourses to be dismantled. Annette Kuhn, for example, proposes the possibility of "reading against the grain,"<sup>53</sup> but few talk of the radical potential of pleasure and desire in traditional 'classic' forms of narrative art, or call for a more elaborate theory of identification that would account for a woman's pleasure in 'looking.' Why bother tearing down if one is theoretically unable to rebuild outside of 'patriarchal discourse'? Mary O'Brien quite rightly noted how, in the final analysis, this form of discourse theory is 'tautological,' 'static,' 'essentialist' and fundamentally 'idealist'.<sup>54</sup> As Terry Lovell writes, "the question addressed to the text is not 'how does it reflect social reality?' but 'by what means is the ideological effect of the interpellation of the subject achieved through the processes whereby meaning is constructed in the text?'"<sup>55</sup>

Cultural forms of entertainment do draw upon social experiences. As Richard Dyer notes in "Entertainment and Utopia,"<sup>56</sup> "show business's relationship to the demands of patriarchal capitalism is a complex one. Just as it does not simply 'give people what they want' (since it actually defines those wants), so, as a relatively autonomous mode of cultural production, it does not simply reproduce unproblematically patriarchal-capitalist ideology."<sup>57</sup> Dyer explains that show business, on the one hand, defines needs and pleasures, and reinforces them on a continual basis, but it also "responds to real needs created by society."<sup>58</sup> There are social tensions, inadequacies and contradictions created by patriarchal capitalism which are being addressed. Dyer outlines certain demands created by, for example, scarcity, exhaustion (resulting from urban life, alienation), monotony, fragmentation, which are countered in cinematic displays of abundance, energy, intense drama, excitement, and closely-knit communities. Yet Dyer also outlines legitimate needs ("especially of class, patriarchal and sexual struggles")<sup>59</sup> which



are resisted, perhaps because they are less easy to contain. Nevertheless, by opening up a cultural space where profound needs, contradictions and conflicts are enacted, and complex forms of pleasure and sexuality are played upon, one cannot always guarantee control—particularly in a medium which utilizes non-cognitive, emotive, metaphoric means of communication. Richard Dyer outlines some of these elements in what he terms 'non-representational' signs—"colour, texture, movement, rhythm, melody, camerawork."<sup>60</sup>

Semiotics has proven to be inadequate in dealing with aspects of the cinematic experience which are not easily dissected in linguistic terms. Feminist film theory, and its application in responsible criticism, helps to articulate what is often emotionally experienced yet is left undiscussed and unanalyzed. In the wake of the legitimization of film theory through 'objective' scientific study, feminists have denied themselves the means to describe pleasures and desires which are not easily articulated in precise mathematical terms. The 'codes' of Realist narrative which Barthes classifies as the non-linear 'semantic/symbolic' codes<sup>61</sup> underline the difficulties of accounting for areas which are difficult to slot, which reside in metaphor, tone, and resonance. Robin Wood comments,

What interests me here above all is the ambiguity of the relationship between the operation of the linear codes and that of the semantic/symbolic structure, which supposedly sustains them but in fact undermines them: I want to claim that the whole linear progress of the film towards its apparently conformist, conventional, reactionary resolution, effectively collapses under the weight of semantic/symbolic implication.<sup>62</sup>

This is central to one's understanding of the way realist narratives operate and the manner in which they can present an ambivalent attitude towards dominant ideological norms. Dyer writes,

Entertainment offers the image of 'something better' to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide. Alternatives, hopes, wishes—these are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and may be realised.

Entertainment does not, however, present models of utopian worlds, as in the classic utopias of Sir Thomas Moore, William Morris et al. Rather the utopianism is contained in the feeling it embodies. It presents, head-on as



*The Devil Is a Woman: Dietrich and the foregrounding of 'femininity.'*

it were, what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organised. It thus works on the level of sensibility, by which I mean an effective code that is characteristic of, and largely specific to, a given mode of cultural production.<sup>63</sup>

The 'poetic,' 'non-representational,' 'symbolic' elements of cinematic narratives, which are not as tangible and not as easily contained and controlled as semiotics and notions of 'suture'<sup>64</sup> would have one believe, opens up the narrative's 'closure' to the kind of multiplicity accorded 'the feminine.' One cannot censor every symbol, every nuance, or the effects of irony.

The 'subject' is *not*, therefore, inexorably, determinedly, necessarily constituted and constructed by the text. Besides the fact that one can remain involved yet distanced from classic realist films through such elements as irony or the manner in which a narrative can comment on its own narrativity (Eliot, Austen, Ophuls, Scorsese et al) there is also the question of a critical, discerning and politicized spectator/reader who is active and responsibly involved in the 'system' of communication.

Entertainment and spectatorship is historically specific and open to variation. Theory (which, if accessible, and directed to a public) gives each 'reader' the tools to analyze how a work is struc-



tured and how it communicates meaning, whatever her/his politics may be. Those who are committed to social change will find overt ideological constructions of gender/class/race unacceptable, and the dramatisation of marginal experiences and oppositional figures of identification invigorating. (See Lori Spring's article on *The Year of Living Dangerously*, elsewhere in this issue). Traditional forms of communication can be used to communicate very untraditional representations of gender relations. There is a great deal of aesthetic pleasure in conventional art that can be mobilised for different ends.

Feminist theory has very specific ends in view and operates within its own code of values. It is up to every feminist to awaken, to rewrite, and to sustain a political consciousness so that social change can and does take place. Art and culture help one envision and articulate experiences, desires, and pleasures that can be subversive and/or revolutionary, and its inclusion in feminist/socialist strategy is crucial. This does not mean that 'revolution' will occur within a privileged, self-enclosed sphere of culture or language—in order to be politically effective, art (and feminist/aesthetic/cultural theory) must never lose sight of the real.

## FOOTNOTES

1. I am using the general term 'gender' here to include Gayle Rubin's concept of a sex-gender system as outlined in "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex" as well as Varda Burstyn's usage of gender-classes in "Masculine Dominance and the State," (The Socialist Register, 1983, pp. 45-89).
2. See, for example, *Women Against Censorship* edited by Varda Burstyn (Douglas and McIntyre, 1985) and *Pleasure and Danger*, edited by Carol Vance (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).
3. I will elaborate further on; however, the argument regarding entertainment and utopia is drawn from Richard Dyer's "Entertainment and Utopia," *Movie* 24, Spring 1977, pp. 2-13.
4. Lovell, Terry, *Pictures of Reality: Aesthetics, Politics, Pleasure* (British Film Institute, 1980) p. 95.
5. Britton, Andrew, "Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment" (upcoming issue of *Movie* 31/32).
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. Lovell, Terry, *Op. cit.* at pg. 36.

9. *Ibid.*
10. Weeks, Jeffrey, *Sex, Politics and Society* (Longman, 1981) pg. 8.
11. Poster, Mark, *Critical Theory of the Family* (Pluto Press, 1978) pg. 96.
12. Mulvey, Laura, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, Vol. 16, No. 3 at pp. 9-10.
13. Kuhn, Annette, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982) p. 48.
14. Mitchell, Juliet, *Women, The Longest Revolution* (Pantheon Books, New York, 1984) p. 244.
15. See, for example, Metz, Christian, "The Imaginary Signifier," *Screen*, Vol. 16, No. 2, pp. 14-17, Baudry, Jean-Louis, "Ideological effects of the basic cinematographic apparatus," *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 2, pg. 39-47 (translated by Alan Williams), and Mulvey, Laura, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," (*Screen*, Vol. 16, No. 3).
16. Lovell, Terry, *Op. Cit.* at pp. 40-43.
17. Mulvey, Laura, *Op. cit.* at p. 7.
18. *Ibid.* at p. 6.
19. Mitchell, Juliet, *Op. cit.* at pp. 242-43.
20. Mulvey, Laura, *Op. cit.* at p. 10.
21. *Ibid.* at p. 11.
22. Class lecture at York, Winter 1985.
23. Mulvey, Laura, *Op. cit.* at p. 11.
23. Mulvey, Laura, *Op. cit.* at p. 11.
24. *Ibid.* at p. 6.
25. *Ibid.* at p. 13.
26. *Ibid.* at p. 16.
27. *Ibid.* at p. 15.
28. *Ibid.* at p. 14.
29. *Ibid.* at p. 18.
30. Mitchell, Juliet, *Op. cit.*
31. Mulvey, Laura, "On *Duel in the Sun*: afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'," *Framework*, No. 15-17, pp. 12-15.
32. These statements were made during a lecture given at York University, Winter 1984.
33. "Women's Exile: Interview with Luce Irigaray," *Ideology and Consciousness* #1, 1977 at p. 69.
34. Stanton, Domna C., "Language and Revolution: The Franco-American Disconnection" in Eisenstein, Hester and Jardine, Alice (eds) *The Future of Difference*, (G.K. Hall and Co., Boston, 1980), p. 75.
35. Mitchell, Juliet, *Op. cit.* at p. 291.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Stanton, Domna, *Op. cit.* at p. 75. (Ms. Stanton translates Kristeva's quote from *Polylogue*.)
38. Britton, Andrew, "The Ideology of Screen," *Movie* #26 pp. 2-28, at p. 14.
39. See, for example, Claire Johnston's "Women's Cinemas as Counter-Cinema" in Claire Johnston (ed.) *Notes on Women's Cinema* (London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 1973).
40. Jacobowitz, Florence, "What does she want? Women and narrative in the New French film," M.A. thesis, April, 1983.
41. Stanton, Domna, *Op. cit.* at p. 74.
42. Lovell, Terry, *Op. cit.* at p. 46.
43. Kaplan, E. Ann, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (Methuen, 1983) p. 104.
44. *Ibid.* at p. 108.
45. *Ibid.* at p. 104.
46. *Ibid.* at p. 112.
47. Rubin, Gayle, *Op. cit.* at p. 180.
48. *Ibid.* at p. 200.
49. Burstyn, Varda, "Masculine Dominance and the State," at p. 50.
50. *Ibid.* at p. 200.
51. Mitchell, Juliet, *Op. cit.* at pp. 289-290.
52. Lovell, Terry, *Op. cit.* at p. 60.
53. Kuhn, Annette, *Op. cit.* at p. 88.
54. She made these comments in a lecture given at the home of Meg Luxton, Winter 1985.
55. Lovell, Terry, *Op. cit.* at p. 54.
56. Dyer, Richard, "Entertainment and Utopia," *Movie* 24 at pp. 2-13.
57. *Ibid.* at p. 3.
58. *Ibid.* at p. 7.
59. *Ibid.*
60. *Ibid.* at p. 3.
61. Barthes, Roland, *S/Z* (Hill and Wang, 1974).
62. Wood, Robin, "Notes for a Reading of *I Walked with a Zombie*" (this issue of *CineAction!*).
63. Dyer, Richard, *Op. cit.* at p. 3.
64. For a discussion of 'suture,' see Jean-Pierre Oudart's "Cinema and Suture," *Screen*, Vol. 18, no. 4, pp. 35-47.



*Cries and Whispers: Anna and the three sisters.*



# **Cries and Whispers** Reconsidered



by Varda Burstyn

WHEN JULIET MITCHELL PUBLISHED *PSYCHO-analysis and Feminism* in 1974, the Lacanian current of psychoanalytic theory won a special, indeed a preponderant place in feminist efforts to use psychoanalysis as a critical tool. It was not an accident that Mitchell was drawn to psychoanalysis. Along with other British and French feminists, Mitchell felt quite rightly that the theories and visions of women's liberation had to take into account issues and dimensions that had hitherto been ignored or dismissed by what we might call (in analogous fashion to the term applied to the marxism which reduces all explanations of social reality to economics and praises only socialist-realist art) vulgar feminism: an approach so empirical that it blotted out from critical view crucial aspects of the reality of gender oppression.

It was also not accidental that Mitchell should be drawn to Lacan. Again, along with other British and French feminists, she was understandably oriented to the ideas of a psychoanalyst who, though not a leftist himself, worked with important thinkers on the French left and shared methodologically in the general structuralist trend that so profoundly shaped French intellectual life in the '60s and '70s. Today the great structuralist edifice that was so brilliantly constructed during these decades is in a state of crisis as a result, I believe, of its own internal brittleness. The intricate and fragile walls formed by its ultra-sophisticated categories have not proven sufficiently ample or resilient to explain and contain ongoing issues in cultural development. Categories which once seemed self-evident and all-encompassing now increasingly seem obscure and limiting.

With respect to the Lacanian psychoanalytic paradigm that has informed left and feminist structuralist currents this means that in the mid-'80s everyone involved in cultural theory is faced with the challenging task of winnowing out the valid and important insights which were developed by dynamic and visionary feminist and socialist theorists working within these frameworks from the husks of categorical chaff that we must now release and blow away. Theory never has had and will not now have a *direct* effect on the mass of cultural producers. But it does strongly influence what we might term important sectors of the progressive avant-garde, whose influence is then felt over time as the ripples of its concerns and innovations spread. It therefore makes sense to aid in the process of reconsideration taking place in theory and thus tackle the question of what of various psychoanalytic theories we want to retain, modify and/or elaborate, and with what we want to dispense.

It is in this context that I offer a reading of Bergman's *Cries and Whispers* that differs very markedly from any feminist treatment of this film—whether empirically or theoretically informed—that I have yet seen. Some interesting work, influenced by the psychoanalytic approach of the British feminists, has been done on the film notably by Deborah Thomas, but I still do not see what I would call a full and accurate reading of it in this work. I believe this has everything to do with the limitations and blind spots of the paradigm in use. So in addition to suggesting a different interpretation of *Cries and Whispers* I hope that this reading will encourage people involved with film to explore other psychoanalytic/socialist/feminist syntheses which have been developed, out of different

traditions on this side of the Atlantic. Specifically in this reading I am drawing on ideas about the repression of infantile and childhood sexuality, gendering and the place of the mother in the psychic constellation of the patriarchal family, developed in autonomous ways by Canadian Gad Horowitz (*Repression*) and Americans Dorothy Dinnerstein (*The Mermaid and the Minotaur*) and Nancy Chodorow (*Mothering*).

The reading of the film proper is in Section II of the article. It is preceded by a prologue on psychoanalytically informed theories of the unconscious and of how we learn to be men and women; and proceeded, in Section III, by a brief conclusion on these ideas. With luck, these will help to explain the reading of the film and some of the elements that could usefully be integrated into critical theory at this time. To conclude this introduction, I would like to situate my own analysis of the film by recapitulating certain conclusions reached by feminist critics about *Cries and Whispers* as an anti-woman, anti-feminist film in which women are manipulated, degraded and subjected to the same old stereotyping common to the sexist cinema, only more viciously than usual. This seemed to be the feminist consensus with Deborah Thomas' dissenting voice being the exception that broke the rule. Bergman was seen as an unrepentant misogynist wallowing in the pleasure of making women live through the contortions and agony of a subservient gender suffering from its physical and moral sins.

That the women of *Cries and Whispers* are in agony there can be no question. But, in my assessment, most feminist critics mistook a portrayal of women's oppression for its justification. I doubt very much that audiences viewing *Cries and Whispers* left the theatres reinforced in their sexism. Virtually everyone finds the film extremely disturbing, and, despite its lush interiors and costumes, anti-erotic though very sexual. I do not think the reaction of profound unease would be universal if the film, in addition to being about patriarchy and patriarchally shaped feminine psychology, were not also a powerful condemnation of these.

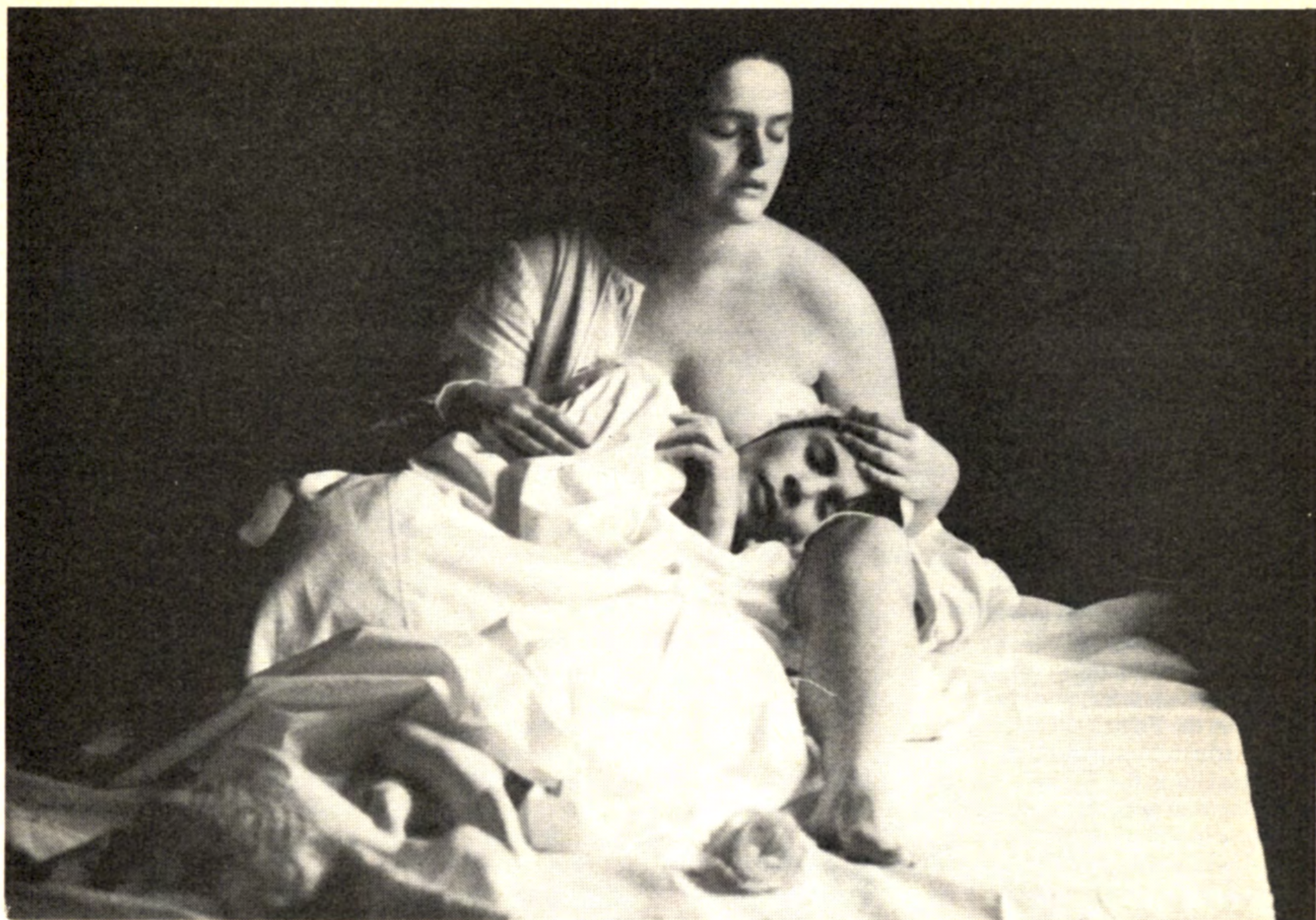
Theory, as I hope to show, may help us consciously to account for the disturbance the film creates. But even without theory, the film has its disquieting, indeed chilling effects. As an intervention in the early seventies, the film sparked searching discussions about its themes, working as an active cultural agent. In this way it helped to shed light particularly on what we could call, borrowing Franz Fanon's term, the "psychology of the oppressed." Although it did not at the time present in direct terms a positive programme for change, the depth of its critique of patriarchal society pushed people to examine their feelings and thoughts, and to take an active relation to society. In this sense it was one of the very best expressions of its time.

I

### The Unconscious, Dreams and Symbols

THE MOST IMPORTANT INSIGHT THAT PSYCHO-analytic critical theory has to offer is that what happens in our life and in our culture is not always either explicit or conscious. Many of our motivations and our interpretations of reality exist beneath the surface of conscious awareness and work through modalities of cognition and volition which differ from the conscious and explicit.







In his rather topographical model of character structure, Freud described three interacting parts: the Id, the Ego and the Superego. Each of these three structures is unconscious to an important degree, but Freud believed that the Id and the Superego were considerably less accessible to consciousness than the Ego—the part that is experienced as the waking I, the part that we all identify as the more or less coherent Self. The Id, according to Freud, is a deep reservoir of universal, amoral and biological drives which preexist the social context of our incarnations. At different stages of his career, Freud described these drives in somewhat different terms, but consistently and increasingly he suggested that erotic/life energy, which he termed libido, is the most powerful of these drives. As the strong and even relentless agent at the core of our beings Freud considered libido to live a privileged existence within the Id, thus compelling the Id to be a source of monumental demands for pleasure and satisfaction on the Ego.

The Superego, on the other hand, was seen to function as a repository for systems of rules and taboos about what one can or cannot desire, do, be—in short, morality. Freud understood morality, internalised in the early years, to be the condensed expression of the constraints of the “reality principle”: that is the dictates of the social conditions under which any given group of human beings will have to make their way. By definition these social conditions are concrete and historical, and the morality produced by them is also in large measure temporal and relative in that it reflects these conditions. In societies organized on the basis of masculine dominance, this means morality will seek to regulate social behaviour in such a way as to reproduce gender hierarchy. The superegos of all individuals raised in patriarchal societies will therefore contain some degree of masculinism in their orientation. And the superegos of men, who interiorize laws as they internalize their identification with older men, will tend to have a heavier patriarchal content.

The Ego must deal then not only with the demands of the Id, but also of the Superego. Insofar as the desires present in the Id are proscribed by the reality principle, articulated intrapsychically through the masculinist prohibitions of the Superego trying to maintain the laws of the patriarchal order of things, there is great, if unconscious, conflict played out on the embattled territory of the Ego. The Ego, in attempting to make sense of the world, maximize pleasure and avoid pain, must juggle conflicting unconscious demands with and against what social life will permit—and this differs according to gender class, economic class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, physical capabilities, as well as individualised family circumstances. Needless to say, different ego ‘styles’ will in part be produced by the patterns of different encounters between individuals and social circumstance. With respect to gender, this is true both of different patterns (‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ ego styles) between women and men but also of different kinds of styles among women and men.

In any case, as the child grows and the reality principle becomes more palpable, the Superego grows apace as the constraints it embodies act to suppress and then repress desires and actions which are considered unacceptable into what

Freud called the ‘dynamically repressed unconscious.’ This is a region of the psyche to be distinguished theoretically at least from the cognitive unconscious, which may hold many capacities and insights but is not a product strictly speaking of the processes of repression. Freud further suggested that the unconscious, especially the dynamically repressed unconscious, has laws very different from the world of waking life.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud elaborated at length some of the crucial differences between conscious and unconscious processes. To begin with, the unconscious has no equivalent sense of time to the notion of past, present and future—there is only the eternal present. Reality, memory and fantasy are also conflated together; related to this, distinctions between right and wrong, the wish and its satisfaction, perception and hallucination, are all absent. These distinctions belong to the conscious self, in which rules and morals restrain our acting upon certain feelings—be they murderously aggressive or passionately lustful. Nevertheless the people against whom we restrain our emotions in waking life are strewn all over the landscape of our dreams, either as corpses or lovers.

Freud called dreams the “royal road to the unconscious” because they provided clues to the deep and hidden motivations which so strongly affect and even govern daily life. For him, they provided direction in plotting the (self)-destructive patterns which were the results of the distortion that the repression of libidinal drives wrought on the personality. As a pioneer of therapy, he concluded that it was essential to bring these patterns to the surface of conscious awareness where the wishes behind them could be seen for that they were, and then, knowingly, either fulfilled or set aside.

The first point to be made about *Cries and Whispers* then is that when we take a psychoanalytic approach to it, we can immediately explain its form. The film is structured like a dream, which in turn is the form most communicative of the realms of the unconscious. The historical past in which it is situated is a metaphor for our own individual pasts (as well as explicitly placing the film in Freud’s historical, not to say hysterical time), our childhoods and the large and powerful legacy that they have created in our dynamically repressed unconscious. Furthermore, the lush and elaborate costumes put us in mind of fairy tales and transport us, along with surreal and magical moments of resurrection, terror and wonder, to the land of the unconscious peopled with strange creatures and bizarre and unpredictable events.

Like a dream, the film moves from reality to fantasy to reality until at the end, the distinction between the two virtually disappears. As in Shakespeare’s plays within plays, we have several dreams/fantasies/memories within the dream/fantasy/memory of the whole film. (Each woman has her own dream, and they share at least one of the experiences collectively, as Deborah Thomas has pointed out.) *Cries and Whispers* also clearly moves from past to present to projected future as if these moments in time were interchangeable points on an undifferentiated continuum. Bergman actually instructs us to approach the film as a dream: It opens in the ragged mists at, according to a large clock, four in the morning, the hour in which people have their longest period of dream sleep.

Moving in the slow motion of dream experience, the camera pans from ancient trees to sleeping house. In psychoanalytic terms, houses usually represent the psyche or being of the dreamer, with different rooms and their contents representing different aspects and feelings. Everywhere in this particular house clocks are ticking in syncopation, suggesting that we adjust our time from normal to mythic. And so we enter the dream of *Cries and Whispers*, a dream, we might fancy, that the wife played by Liv Ullmann in Bergman’s realist film

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OPPOSITE ABOVE—Anna and Agnes: the ‘Pieta,’ lesbian version. BELOW—Karin and Maria: the resistance to female intimacy.



*Scenes from a Marriage* might have dreamt the night that she left her husband.

To interpret dreams and the unconscious we must understand their language of symbol and metaphor. If we want to get below the surface of a dream's manifest content (which like the 'plot' of *Cries and Whispers* is in any case incoherent, jagged and confusing) to understand its latent content, its full and even true meaning, there is no point in approaching it literally and head on. We must come at it obliquely and associationally and make our main tool of analysis a symbolic approach. Symbols, metaphors, analogies—the forms of the unconscious—contain condensations, displacements, projections and introjections—the content of the unconscious.

Thus the interpretation of the language of the unconscious cannot be arbitrary but must, as many others have pointed out particularly in film theory, be understood in terms of its own time and place. So for any given individual the selection of symbols in dream life is governed by the way libidinal drives encounter the contours of social reality. But this does not mean that symbolic meanings exist only at one level. I think that they work on at least three, which interact in a complex fashion with one another. Powerful symbols do have universal and individually specific levels of meaning as well as what we might more ordinarily call historical. The emphasis on the historical level—the level we can most easily read collectively—is the most important for engaged theory and practice, providing that it acts as the filter through which the other dimensions are approached, rather than as a block to their understanding.

In this light, the content of *Cries and Whispers* begins to become clear. It is a symbolic explication of the constraints, restraints and suppressions—in a word, the repression—placed on women and their unconscious desires within a (specifically Swedish) context which is at once modern and 'emancipated' (the context in which the film is conceived, produced and consumed) and old-fashioned and traditionalist (the patriarchal and bourgeois times in which it is ostensibly located; the psychic past it represents). Its power across linguistic and national borders derives from the fact that the main features of both contemporary and nineteenth century patriarchal capitalism are very similar across different European and North American cultures and are therefore recognizable by audiences in many different countries, including those in Eastern Europe, because they share the same gender division of labor and social alienation.

### **Polymorphous Sexuality, Homoeroticism and the Gendering Processes**

**B**Y CREATING AND THEN PLUMBING THE lives of four extraordinary late nineteenth century women characters, *Cries and Whispers* presents a stunning vision of how the patriarchal and bourgeois repression of universal drives works to fit women for their place in the gender division of labor, across what we call social classes: as that group of people charged with the care of children and the nurturance of men, and as that gender which is excluded from power on the larger social scale as a result of this division of labor. The most important drive in question is libido, and at issue is the relation of its infantile and childhood repression to the maintenance of women's oppression as a whole. In order to see the specificities of how this is expressed in the film, we'll need another psychoanalytic detour which sketches some key concepts for the understanding of how little human children grow up to become the divergent creatures we call men and women.

The story begins with the birth of a human infant who is a bundle of libido (sexual energy). Initially this sexual energy is not focussed as to aim or object. It exists as a general drive to "obtain pleasure from zones of the body," in Freud's words. Character and personality develop as body and psyche mature in an inter-connected sequence which is a combination of genetically encoded physiological developmental steps and socially organized psychological stages. In this sequence, the child's original polymorphous libidinal focus moves from mouth to anus to genitals as s/he learns through the control of appetite, toilet functions and genital pleasure a series of critical lessons: differentiation and individuation from the parent (mother), the need for physical and psychological pacing and control in order to participate as a member of human society. As a result, intrapsychic, interpersonal and social relations are all permeated with sexual energy and meaning in various ways.

Because of this primal sexual constitution, children develop an erotic attraction (erotic in the polymorphous sensual terms of infantile sexuality) towards those upon whom they depend for their great vital needs; those who, in the process, feed, stroke, bathe and cuddle them, or, as the case may be, reject, neglect, even beat them. Because our family system is organized around women's exclusive responsibility for primary childcare, children's strongest sexual feelings, whether positive, negative or ambivalent, are almost always involved with the mother. And because of the way that fathers are usually placed in a minor nurturing role but a primary competitive position for the mother's affections, attentions and loyalties, infantile and early childhood erotic attachment will be less intense than towards the mother, though it may grow in intensity farther down the line.

It is not simply a question of the intensity of attachment, however, but also of the nature of the feelings involved. It is here that Dorothy Dinnerstein and Nancy Chodorow have made some critical contributions. Dinnerstein explains that the reason both women and men love and hate women so intensely is that all of us came into the world under the aegis of a woman who was not only good, but also bad; who seemed moreover in her munificence or denial to be the world itself and then the agent of that world, able, so to speak, to overcome its obstacles with a single bound. Because of this, our unconscious, primitive self continues under the surface of our grown up personalities to demand satisfaction for needs mortal women cannot possibly fulfill, and becomes furious and feels betrayed when they fail. Chodorow adds that women themselves may often reject other women for another reason as well: because ego boundaries are less well established between mother and daughter than between mother and son, daughters must often repudiate their mothers as a desperate step in individuating and finding autonomy.

But none of these very important consequences of the way parenthood and childhood are organized negate the libidinally charged nature of these relations. As the necessity to break the mother-infant symbiosis asserts itself and the child must be weaned away from the mother's body and attention, the nature, extent and fulfillment of that charge must undergo modification so that the child can mature physically and psychologically, and the mother can regain her autonomy. It is this necessity, universal among humans and common among the higher primates, that in part lies at the core of the experience that Freud illuminated when he wrote about the rise and resolution of the Oedipus complex. But the universal need for ending the infant/parent symbiosis takes different forms in different societies, and much of what Freud plotted in his discussion of the Oedipus complex was peculiar to his times,



and not universal to all humans.

Because of the way that the incest taboo was lived out in (bourgeois families of) late nineteenth century European society this weaning (including not just the end of nursing but also toilet training, and in our culture, training against childhood genital pleasure) took place in such a way as to enculturate the young to reproduce an extremely hierarchical and unequal social system. This process was extremely painful, for children of both sexes. For it required the utter renunciation of sensual physical contact with adults and usually peers as children learned that life outside (and often inside) the parent-infant dyad was a desperate struggle organized around the principle of might equals right.

Learning the lessons of renunciation and social placement through the rise and resolution of the incest taboo was so painful under these circumstances that Freud actually considered the renunciation of erotic wishes vis-à-vis the parents the major traumatic event of childhood, and, in his opinion, even of life as a whole. To this we can add that in societies where the processes of individuation are less harsh, where childhood bodily pleasure is encouraged among peers and where the basic repressions of individuation are not associated with cutthroat social relations, the trauma is much less.

Though Freud conflated a universal social process (an incest taboo) with historically specific ones (gender identity of nineteenth century men and women as encoded in the classical Oedipal drama *per se*), his method of analyzing psychic content demonstrated in fact that the frustration and eventual resolution of infantile erotic desire typical of the Oedipal constellation was socially (and therefore, we conclude, historically) organized and determined. Both his work and the work of many others since him have elaborated on what our social system demands in terms of the creation of 'masculinity' and 'femininity.' Because of the enormous difference in men's and women's social roles and power, in societies of masculine dominance, male and female children face different paths as they negotiate the tasks of physical and cultural maturation.

Specifically, Freud posited some traumatic developmental processes in relation to the physical differentiation between the sexes most vividly obvious in the fact that boys have penises and girls do not. This brings us to the next major contested offering of Freudian thought: to his notions of castration anxiety and penis envy as, respectively, men's and women's existential burdens in sexist society.

Briefly, Freud became convinced that men tended to suffer from a deep and acute anxiety about their penises. This had its basis in feelings of competition and inferiority vis-à-vis other, older and/or more powerful men, and took the unconscious shape of the fear of becoming like a woman—without the penis, castrated—if they were unable in various ways to maintain positions of power and/or avoid the wrath of more powerful people. In the masculinist unconscious, ideas of status and safety are so closely fused to the possession and size of genitals and the sexual prowess defined by this that phallic power and castration anxiety are experienced as powerful metaphors for social power or its loss in general.

The origin of these unconscious feelings is one of the mysteries Freud purported to solve. In a masculinist culture boys develop these fears as a result of two interconnected aspects of libidinal renunciation. In order to be accepted as male they must give up their identification with their primary parent—the mother—to become like their father; and they must also give up their libidinal desires towards her for fear of suffering punishment at their father's hands. In a culture where masculinity was valued so much more than femininity it is easy to understand why boys would be forced to identify with mascu-

linity, and desire to possess the phallus which symbolized it. As well, it is easy to understand how castration anxiety developed in a culture which abhorred childhood masturbation and threatened physical consequences for it. The fear of castration, though quintessentially symbolic of anxieties about social power, was (and remains today) grounded in the literal-mindedness of childhood.

Penis envy, like castration anxiety, was a product of the fact that in sexist societies both genders want to possess the symbol of the dominant gender-class. This can be seen in the denigration of gays through their classification as feminine—not 'real men'—in our culture. Clearly, this is based on the understanding of masculinity (possession of penis) and femininity (lack of penis) as terms of social power and placement rather than as terms describing a physical reality. Of course, this is not surprising in a society saturated with and driven by castration anxiety on the one hand and a wild overvaluation of the phallus (the penis in its symbolic dimensions) on the other.

In such a culture men, whose psychology has been shaped by the anxieties and desires of our brand of masculinity, cannot but think (unconsciously at least) that those who do not have the penis must passionately envy it. Now contemporary feminist psychologists have convincingly put into question the idea that penis envy exists as a core aspect of character structure among all women. Women, the clinical evidence suggests, are not as uniformly tied into overvaluing the phallus as are men, and their identities are not so wrapped up with genital activity and prowess. Emotional relationships and parenthood play a larger part in identity for women than for men. But that men *believe* that all women covet the penis because men know that women excluded from full subjecthood must at some level want equality and/or revenge—this is something that I think cannot be questioned. And that women share in a common symbolic vocabulary as a result of their membership in a patriarchal culture, this too is irrefutable.

Increasingly during the last 150 years men's unconscious and as it were infantile concerns (identity and castration) have been restimulated by political reality. Women are plainly not happy in this position and are challenging its arrangements. What Freudian psychoanalysis taught us, even with its patriarchal bias, is that people will have to change their childhood experiences if they want to grow up to be different as adults. With respect to women, this means that the experience of females as daughters will have to change, and by extension this necessitates a different kind of mothering as well. Though penis envy and castration anxiety would not perhaps be the terms that a feminist psychology would generate, it is true that the way women are made socially impotent is based in a particular kind of repression of childhood sexuality, which according to Freud, effects in women a kind of psychic crippling or "mutilation." Feminists have been rightly angry that this dispassionately described distortion can then be approved by Freud as "healthy femininity." But to acknowledge the existence of this mutilation is not necessarily to validate it. Rather we can use the knowledge of the consequences of women's acquiescence in their 'lack of a phallus/castration' (the feminine personality structure, passive and masochistic) to change how we organize gender and childhood arrangements.

To do this we need to know how this early mutilation occurs. Freud pointed to and others have pursued its genesis in the relation of daughter to mother. Mother is doubly charged: to raise her daughter in ways which make the mother feel she has given her child the best life has to offer and also to raise her so that she learns the rules of the world in order that she may make the best of her lot. These two imperatives are rarely







congruent in reality, but different mothers are differently aware, consciously, of their mutual antagonism. In any case, aware or not, survival both of the child and of oneself comes first, so mothers must pass on to their daughters the fundamental laws of the culture. For daughters the earliest and most profound acquisition of the laws of gender and power takes place in their libidinal socialization, just as it does for boys. And its most important base experience is their earliest renunciation of passionate attachment to their first love object, who, because of her role as primary parent, occupies the number one position of attachment for girls as well as boys: the mother.

Much has been made in popular as well as scientific literature of the psychic scars of the boy's Oedipus complex. He loves his mother passionately and must renounce her to his father/older men until he grows big and gets a big phallus and can have 'someone like Mommy' too. But less has been made of the enormously damaging prospect facing his sister: she loves her mother as passionately as he, but she must renounce her desire for mother forever, not just until she's a big girl. There's no question of postponement, of waiting till she has grown up and grown a penis. The girl, minus the phallus, must grow into the role of exclusively heterosexual mother-wife herself, must become like her mother. The process of renunciation then colors the process of identification with extreme ambivalence: the daughter may hate the mother for her ultimate aloofness as well as love her for her nurturance; alongside adoration, she may also dread the mother because of her trapped position vis-à-vis her father and other men.

This realization is the kernel at the heart of what Freud meant when he said that girls do not experience castration anxiety as such but experience themselves as *already* castrated. And though the image was grim, he also suggested that from this moment on (from the moment when primary gender identity—"I am a girl/boy"—became fused with a political sense of gender hierarchy—"boys/girls are strong/weak") girls feel their own genitals as a "wound" to their self-esteem. Symbolically, the wound represents the loss of instrumentality and activity in the world at large, as rights to non-maternal worldly satisfaction are renounced with the right to satisfaction with (the future representative of) the first love. Note carefully that this whole sequence presupposes what is effectively a bisexual or even exclusively female orientation on the part of the young girl. This is critical to emphasize because it testifies to the polymorphous nature of our sexuality, and its tendency to become involved with persons who are significant in our lives.

In any case, just as boys' renunciation of mother is part of their identification with father/other men; just as it requires a painful break in identification with mother, and with her attributes (such as softness, receptivity, compassion) in the learning of masculinity, so girls' renunciations also entail a break in identification with the father, because as girls they must become the opposite of the kind of person who has sexual access to their mother. The processes by which "masculinity" and "femininity" are intrapsychically repressed are so tortuous that they always produce failure, dissidents, misfits. None of us, not even the most apparently normal, is without flaws according to the standards of the system. But some of us

are more obviously misfits than others. In terms of gender and sex the people who stick out most are stigmatized through labelling, and one of the most socially damaging labels is that of homosexuality. Same-sex love is particularly taboo because it implicitly challenges the gender division of labor, and the final point I want to make before looking at the film is about women's version of homosexuality, i.e., lesbianism.

There is as yet no comprehensive theory of sexual orientation that fully accounts for all levels and instances of difference in (love) object choice. Nor is there a consistent and precise fit between sexual orientation and ego style (lesbians can be aggressive or timid, so can women whose preference is exclusively heterosexual). Nevertheless there is something to be said for trying to understand the psychodynamics not only of certain aspects of homosexuality as they combine gender identity and erotic formation, but also of *ideas* of homosexuality as they occupy and symbolically express political dynamics and positions in cultural terms.

The culture of masculine dominance is threatened by lesbianism because it feels that the lesbian woman wants to take men's place vis-à-vis women, to displace men and render them obsolete. Amazons become the quintessential lesbians, threatening not only to replace but also to vanquish men. They are thus, for men, potentially terrifying bearers of the castration knife, incarnations of a powerful and rejecting mother. With respect to lesbianism as a woman's lot, Freud believed that the lesbian sexual orientation was indeed a product of a girl's identification with her father (this was what made her a "mannish" woman) in order to take his place with her mother.

This identification may indeed account for a certain—even a large—part of some lesbians' psychic positioning, but in many cases there is another component which is operative to greater or less degrees, and is potentially much more subversive of patriarchal values. This is the strong identification a lesbian may feel with what Freud called the "phallic mother," the strong, powerful and magical woman the child experienced before she had come to understand that her mother—'castrated'—was also socially impotent. When a woman's sexual orientation is grounded in the identification with the strong mother rather than or even in addition to the socially powerful father, her love for women cannot simply be coopted through masculinist cultural modalities which undercut women as a class. Such a love is conducive to the construction of alliances between women because it is based on self-respect and admiration for women grounded in identification with and respect for maternal power.

Because of the fact that gender identity and erotic preference are relatively autonomous from one another, in real life women whose preference is to relate genitally with men can have the same kind of self-respect and identification with strong women, especially if they have relations with (some) men which are solidary. But it is the lesbian who, as a sign, symbolically communicates the threat of autonomy from and potential displacement of men which patriarchally oriented men so fear will be the result of women's rebellion and revenge. So it is in the treatment of lesbians and/or what we can call lesbian themes that so much is revealed.

Given the extremely repressed (oppressed and suppressed) place of lesbian(ism)s in cinema, and given how very young the discussion of these issues was in terms of the second wave of feminism (two years before Juliet Mitchell published *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*) the making of *Cries and Whispers* becomes even more remarkable than it seemed at the time. Freud talked about the regions of pre-Oedipal mother love as murky depths still uncharted; he also likened them and their location as it were below the Oedipal phase to the Minoan

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OPPOSITE ABOVE—Maria and 'femininity: the child-woman. BELOW—Agnes' suffering.



civilization that underlay the better understood Mycenaean. The analogy was more than apt, for we now suspect that in Minoan society women were respected, effective and fully sexual subjects, while in later and classical Greece they became a subjugated gender-class in the context of a repressive phallogocracy. Yet Ingmar Bergman and the actors who made *Cries and Whispers* explored these regions in 1972 in mind-boggling terms, not in the dry dense language of psychoanalysis but in the pulsating and dramatic language of film.

## II

### The Women

**B**ELOW THE NORDIC-GOTHIC SURFACE OF its manifest content, *Cries and Whispers* is a film about the loss of mother-love and its consequences: women's loss of love and esteem for their own selves and for other women. Concurrently, though in a much less developed way, the film is concerned with men's loss of love for women, with their fear and contempt for women as 'impotent' and 'castrated,' as both less than fully human and as vengeful furies. The latent content is concerned with the repression of women's erotic orientation to women—the homosexual side to the bi-sexual/polymorphous constitution women have as their human legacy—and the psychic split it entails. It is thus also the story of the split that occurs in women between human and sexual being. As director of a collaborative project Bergman is at the helm, shaping the overall work in a number of ways. As I will shortly suggest, the grammar of the film—the editing—is its most important substructure, and it is completely concerned with the whole complex of anxieties and meanings implied by the term 'castration.'

The dream-like film opens, as already noted, at four in the morning with many cues to the viewers to read it as a text dealing with the unconscious. We enter a house of striking colors—red, black and white. Though perhaps unknown even to Bergman himself, these are the colors associated with the ancient Amazons, and as soon as we have formed our impressions of the context we meet Agnes/Harriet Andersson in her agony. She is the sister who will act as the dramatic pivot around which the three other women in the story will in various ways revolve. Having witnessed her presence and her pain, we are quickly taken through the first of what will be a series of brilliant red dissolves, back to the central events that Agnes is now remembering of her childhood: these are Agnes's neglect and rejection by her beautiful and (significantly) *unattainable* mother. We learn through voice over and visual text that in compensation for being shut out Agnes "spied" on her mother (the erotic voyeurism of childhood) even though she knew it was "wrong." The sequence conveys a strong sense of longing, which closes on a shared look between mother and daughter: "a look so full of sorrow that I nearly burst into tears," Agnes says of it.

What is this longing and sadness mutely acknowledged between mother and daughter? And why is this sequence, and other privileged sequences in the film, bracketed by the red dissolves which separate and punctuate the film's dramatic components? I interpret the reason for the pain of the exchange between Agnes and her mother as their acknowledgement of Agnes's (symbolic) castration—her 'girlness' and her consequent permanent inability to possess her mother—and the recognition of the mother's defeat in that of her daughter, for she once was a daughter too. The red dissolves—visual symbols derived from the castration imagery of the male director—represent above all the wounded membranes of the castrated woman, marking and encompassing all experience from that moment on.

rience from that moment on.

Agnes, it seems, has never recovered from her early wounds and defeats. When we meet her in the film, she is dying after a long life of pain. However, partially conscious of her loss, she is also partially redeemed and rewarded by her ability to have the one relationship of any true tenderness and eroticism in the whole film—her relationship with the servant Anna. Deborah Thomas has noted that there is a 'masculine' aspect to Agnes's character demonstrated by her 'appropriation of the word' as she writes in her journal. Thomas is not wrong here, but she fails to give enough weight to the most important sign of Agnes's androgyny, that is to the lesbian content of her relationship with Anna.

There has been considerable debate over whether or not this relationship is "merely" a substitute mother-daughter relationship, or whether it is "genuinely erotic" or "lesbian" in nature. All adult sexual relationships include, consciously or otherwise, needs and behaviors experienced in the first flowering of eroticism towards the parents. The father-daughter and/or mother-son dynamic is always present (and often remarked upon) in adult heterosexual relationships. Yet this does not serve to disqualify these interactions from the status of the adult and the fully erotic, nor to reduce them to mere searches for parent substitutes. Lesbian relations have to be viewed in the same way. When this is understood, Agnes and Anna's relationship must be seen as adult, the more so because of an additional dynamic: their friendship is also the closest approximation to the sister-to-sister relationship (a relationship of equals, most clearly expressing self-esteem and love for others) that Agnes clearly craves and that Anna, watching from outside the bourgeois family circle, longs for as well.

Agnes' is but one of the stories of the making of a woman in patriarchal culture. Karin/Ingrid Thulin, Agnes's sister, has an even more gruesome tale to tell, indeed she literally lives out the drama of the "wound." A woman of real intellect and ability, she is shown living in total subservience to a frozen and controlling man, fairly drowning in her feelings of antagonism for him. She is apparently unable to respond with any warmth to her sisters, and, we gather, to anyone else. She seems to be a woman marshalling vast amounts of energy to keep the lid closed on a reservoir of turbulent feelings which threaten to spill over at any moment. Misery and entrapment are written in lines of despair all over her face. With her we travel through another blood red dissolve to an incident as it were in her past, but whose status as fact or fantasy is quite unclear (and therefore unimportant). The scene is set at dinner, as Karin sits across from her silent husband and the tension between them mounts. Suddenly Karin breaks a wine glass in a clumsy gesture of what appears to be barely contained anger. She sits at the table alone, toying with a shard of glass. "It's all a tissue of lies," she declares, and makes for the bedroom. What, we ask ourselves, is she going to do with the glass? Will she slit her husband's deserving throat? And what is this mysterious tissue of lies?

In the boudoir to which Karin has retired the theme of repressed woman-love surfaces again, very explicitly. We become aware, as Karin does, that Anna is watching her. We already know that Anna's sexuality is oriented towards women and we begin to sense that Karin realizes this as well. "What are you thinking?" demands Karin defiantly, but Anna says nothing, simply continuing her silent, instrumental gaze. Karin apparently finds the frank look unbearable and lashes out at Anna. Yet as soon as she has struck she sees the look of shock and pain on Anna's face, and begs her forgiveness. In a moment of great courage and dignity, Anna refuses the apology, for which she is again punished. In an act which also



permits Karin to experience, though in a muted and disassociated way, woman to woman sexuality, Karin torments Anna by instructing her to undress her. Bergman chooses to play out this masked exchange between the two women as they replay the impotent voyeurism of childhood with strong sensual overtones, leaving no doubt as to the pertinence of the lesbian theme in this context as well as in relation to Agnes.

When this exchange has come to its conclusion and Karin is ready for bed, she dismisses Anna and the scene closes over her solitude. We realize that we are about to find out just how she means to dispose of the piece of glass she still has with her. But how profoundly shocked we are, nevertheless, when she slashes her own vagina, cutting through that "tissue of lies"—the lie of her own sexuality—which must, in its function as receptacle for the conjugal phallus, behave against the desires of her heart. The whole drama comes to a macabre climax (the scene is paced like the standard sexual encounter: foreplay, plateau, orgasm) when Karin presents her bloody and by now truly lethal and castrating vagina to her husband, the *vagina dentata* of castration anxiety at once masochistic and sadistic, symbol of her hatred of him and her own powerlessness. But it is the sequence of the whole episode that explains its overall meaning: Karin's renunciation of Anna symbolizes the renunciation of her own autonomous sexuality which occurred when she gave up her mother/betrayed herself in that implicit earlier drama. Her present state of castrated castrator is a result and a precise echo of what happened to her in childhood.

How important the repression of mother love, woman to woman love and women's bi-sexual potential is to women's abilities to love and respect one another as equals is dramatized in the interaction between Karin and Maria/Liv Ullmann, the third sister. When Agnes dies, the relationship between the two surviving siblings, so long mediated by the need to care for Agnes, begins to crumble. Once the repressive mediation has gone (and it is interesting to note that it took the form of looking after an invalid and somewhat infantilized sibling, that is a maternal form), Maria, the most apparently emotional of the sisters, is overwhelmed by feelings and begins to blurt out desires she has harbored for a long time: Why can't she and Karin talk? she wants to know. Why can't they be friends? Above all, why can't they *touch* one another?

Karin is appalled by all these cloying overtures, and resists, clearly suffering, when Maria reaches out and begins to stroke her cheek. Anna's lesbian eyes are taking in the exchange, when we realize that Karin is clawing at her throat, literally suffocating in guilt if her muttered phrases can be taken to account for her distress. "Agnes and Anna," she says distractedly, "... there was something ... yes, it's disgusting ... contemplated suicide." In phrases as sharp as the fragment of glass she wielded, Karin is giving us clues to the cause of her guilt. It seems that she feels a strongly controlled desire to do that which Anna and Agnes did, something so disgusting that she would have to kill herself even for contemplating it.

At this very moment, Maria chooses to press even more closely against Karin, and Karin snaps. "Do you know how much I hate you?" she spits at Maria as she struggles to defend herself against the latent feelings of tenderness and eroticism she has for her sister, "you with your wet smiles?" The situation becomes intolerable, Maria bursts into tears and Karin screams. But when the tension has been released in this emotional catharsis, something miraculous happens. In stark contrast to the interaction between Karin and her husband at dinner, truth, not falsehood, asserts itself and the sisters are reunited. To the aching lyricism of a Bach cello suite they embrace and kiss, they laugh, they gaze into one another's eyes

(as mothers and children and lovers do), they grasp each other's hands.

By expressing their real feelings, desires and injuries, their love and their hate, they have been momentarily able to break through their enforced and internalized separation to love each other again. The exquisite poignancy of this moment is, however, heightened by its brevity, for as Bergman will make clear at the end when Maria betrays Karin's need for affirmation of what went between them in order to go to her waiting husband, in a patriarchal culture women are not permitted this kind of love for one another. It makes them too strong.

And so we come to Maria. If Agnes is the symbol for the woman who deals with life spiritually—the androgynous celibate, spinster, nun who prefers the abstract body of God to the concrete bodies of men—and if Karin stands for the angry, bitter and frustrated woman who has more ability than her threatened husband, Maria is an altogether different kettle of fish in the patriarchal typology of women. And at first glance, she seems to have felt femininity as a "wound to her narcissism" (Freud) rather less than her sisters. Indeed she is the prototype of the narcissistic female as we have come to think of her. Maria represents the most vaginal of women with her 'wet smiles,' full red lips and dresses and her bored yet desperate seductions. Further, as Thomas has pointed out, she is equated with the sexually attractive mother by identical descriptions, by her relation to her own daughter and by Liv Ullmann's playing both characters.

Maria is beautiful and thoroughly feminine, but it becomes clear that she is very far from psychologically intact. As her story/memory/fantasy unfolds, several things become clear. Though feminine with a vengeance, she is actively sought but incapable of real emotional giving, stunted in her feminine capacities. Her flirtations are inadequate substitutes for meaningful activity in her life. We learn, from the doctor, the "man of substance," that over the years she has become more beautiful, but simultaneously has also grown petulant, sulking, capricious, bored and empty. In other words, she is nothing more than a 'cunt'—a woman drained of all non-sexual capacities and meanings (which need not blind us to the fact that he is nothing more than a 'prick,' and a frightened one at that).

Deprived of direction and a sense of worth in life, like Karin she seeks revenge on her husband Joakim as well as on the doctor who bores her despite her need for his sexual services, a need both physical and psychological. The 'truly feminine' woman can only be what she is if she receives constant affirmation of her attractiveness from men, and is thus ultra-dependent on the dominant gender, and, not surprisingly, ultra-angry. Once again the themes of castration leap to the fore as Joakim, in a gesture meant to produce guilt and contrition, produces that good old phallic signifier, the knife, and stabs himself. It is as if he were saying, "See, you have emasculated me by your infidelity and I will now make that castration clear." He acts out the castration he has experienced at his wife's hand—she has sought out phalluses other than his and thus thrown ignominy upon him.

Maria on the other hand refuses to go to his aid, as if to say, "If I can't have gender equality and erotic self-determination neither can you. I refuse to confirm your entitlement to my allegiance." So we have more blood, more gaping wounds, physical and psychological, all stemming from the symbolic script of castration. And we also learn a lesson in gender politics: the beautiful, 'feminine' woman suffers as much, if somewhat differently, in patriarchal society as other women do. Confined to a superficial existence because of the overvaluation of her physical beauty, she is simultaneously punished because that beauty serves as the constant reminder to







men that they cannot control and possess the women (who represent the primal mothers) in their lives as they would like to do. Her mutilation and revenge are as severe and powerfully motivated as are her sisters'.

The only woman who is not involved directly in a castration scenario, who has escaped the worst patriarchal mutilation, is the one who has also escaped the heterosexual resolution of the Oedipal complex in an unambiguous way. She is Anna the lesbian, and significantly also, the working-class woman.

In the literature on *Cries and Whispers* a great deal is made of Anna's longing after her lost daughter in her relationship with Agnes. I think this evaluation of Anna's motivations is so incomplete as to be wrong. Again, we have the desire to reduce and thereby denigrate an adult exchange of eroticism to the libidinal relationship of parent and child that I noted in discussing the character of Agnes. And there is a further problematic overtone: the judging of erotic exchange against the standard of heterosexual practice. This is a very problematic attitude from the point of view of women's liberation. For example, a number of critics suggested, that Anna's "ample thighs and breasts," in Joan Mellen's words, connoted "bovine" qualities. This evaluation implicitly accepted the dominant physical stereotypes typical of sexist and capitalist aesthetics and misappreciates the statement of refusal to comply with those stereotypes that (Bergman's choice of) Anna's appearance communicates. It also reduces the parent (mother)-infant relationship to some pre-cultural animal instinct, in other words to less than human standards, an attitude that participates in the patriarchal denigration of nurturing. Yet Anna is the only woman who has the courage, the human courage, to face the fear of death when Agnes's soul is in agony.

The continuous stress placed on Anna's maternalism seems to reflect a flight from the reality of her physical lust for and contact with women's bodies. Of the four protagonists, Anna is the only woman who is actively involved in seeking and defining her own sexual gratification. Yes, her sexuality combines tenderness and eroticism. Most women love with a combination of tender and erotic feelings, whether they love men or women. What is noteworthy about Anna is not this, but her activity and guiltlessness in seeking it from the outset of the film.

Indeed, Anna is a strong, competent, buxom and unrepentant Eve who bites the apple with forcefulness and pleasure. She literally performs this action at the beginning of the film following, and by extension repudiating the patriarchal content of, her prayers. That bite conveys to us that, religious feeling notwithstanding, nothing is going to interfere with her enjoyment of female genital sexuality. (Later, as we see how she is denied emotional fulfillment, we come to understand just how truly she has eaten of the fruit of a tree stunted by cruel pruning.) It is not coincidental that she shows guiltless love for that apple and what it symbolizes and is also the only woman who does not in some important way betray herself and the sisters (other women). This verifies the necessary connection between self-esteem, esteem of other women and homoeroticism which is at work in the Freudian scheme of feminization.

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OPPOSITE—Maria and 'femininity': the erotic woman.

Anna is trapped above all else by her class position. Because she is a domestic servant whose ties to her own family have been severed, she is not likely to betray other women for the petty privileges that bourgeois men accord to the women of their class. Her oppression as a member of the working class breaks her alignment and identification with men as a group. However, her isolation as a woman worker, cut off from men and women of her own class, means that she is excluded from relationships of equality. The film suggests that they are impossible with the bourgeois sisters. Agnes, the androgynous one, partially breaks through the class barrier in brief moments. But it is also clear that Anna is for her a second-best substitute for the love of her 'real' (biological and social) sisters. Anna's own final story/memory/fantasy is of herself, seen through Agnes's eyes, as a sister among the others, one of the people whom Agnes "loves most in the world," an equal among equals. If mother love is present in the lesbian relation, then so, represented by Anna's dreams, is sisterly love, the love of solidarity between autonomous, powerful beings. Anna represents the unfulfilled potential of this love, trapped by economic and gender class structures. The sisters represent its repression.

### The Men

A FEW VERY BRIEF WORDS ON THE ROLE OF men in this film: there's no question that the men are secondary characters in *Cries and Whispers*, that the film's main concern is the relation of women to women, the creation and maintenance of "femininity." But in patriarchal culture psychic mutilation occurs on both sides of the gender fence, and as I pointed out before, castration anxiety is much heavier for men than for women. If we look at who the men are and what they are made to confront in the film, we see that the castration theme is the major thread that runs through their experience as well. Karin's offering to her husband is the dreaded toothed vagina. For men, it is an unconscious symbolic inversion of the awe and envy of birth-giving capacities little boys experience, emerging in a horrific form as a result of the denigration and repression of identification with femininity. From life-giving to death-dealing, the maternal genitals come to represent vengeful maternal castration. Maria's husband's stabbing is a suicidal preventive strike, a sadomasochistic attempt to stave off the worst by anticipating it. It also demonstrates a simultaneous fear of castration of the phallus with a fear of the phallus as itself a castrator.

The doctor's cold monologue to Maria, though couched in the kinds of terms that attempt to give him existential substance while depriving her of any subjecthood, is nothing but an attempt to keep control and self-worth in face of his own feelings of desire when she clearly demonstrates lust for his genitals and utter indifference to his pretentious theories. In other words, she sees him as empty and frighteningly challenges his own sense of identity. Indirectly, given what psychoanalysis tells us about masculinity, she is thereby rejecting the acknowledgement of his phallic power. Finally, the minister's incredible eulogy over Agnes's dead body illustrates one of the most sublimated, but no less patriarchal for that, attempts to ward off the revenge of woman: idealization and canonization in the patriarchal appropriation of women's suffering. With luck, the heavenly father will deal with this disturbing woman, and keep her from haunting the minister's conscience and his unquestioned and privileged relationship as spiritual authority.

In fact, from the point of view of the male characters in this film—and from the point of view of the male director who



animated the entire psychodrama—the women's macabre horror-show puts the patriarchal order into question, from its most physical, earthbound dimensions to its most metaphysical realms. In the final scene, the sisters are divided by the men. Patriarchal control is reasserted when Maria betrays Karin and when Anna is dismissed in heartless and exploitative terms. But we know, having been privy to the scenes where the women's murderous rage against the men was expressed, that patriarchal victory is hollow. The price that gender stratification exacts from men, though much less elaborated in *Cries and Whispers*, is steep and gory, and any man watching the film's conclusion must find it very difficult to desire the masculine position once its prerequisites are spelled out.

### III

#### Conclusion

THE ORIGINAL VERSION OF THIS ARTICLE was written six years ago. At that time, Lacanian-influenced critical theory was at its zenith. In those days the "Law of the Father" was so massive a preoccupation that many lost sight of how powerful was the effect of the mother, at times despite, at times because of her oppressed, suppressed and repressed place. Today, the influence of Dinnerstein and Chodorow is slowly filtering into feminist critical theory in North America. Ann Kaplan in *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*, for example, has begun to engage with the place of the mother, and suggests that studying the treatment of this in cinema is one of the most important tasks for feminists who are trying to come to grips with sexist and feminist film strategies. This is a promising beginning but we have much farther to go.

There is another major problem that has arisen out of the Lacanian paradigm specifically, and out of the structuralist fascination with language and discourse more generally. (While psychoanalytic thinkers discount Michel Foucault's dismissal of psychoanalysis, they have been very much affected by his emphasis on discourse, and it's shown up in the literature.) It is not surprising that cultural criticism should take discourse very seriously—why bother writing about any phenomenon from an engaged perspective unless one thinks it's important? But in all the emphasis on matters of the mind something very dangerous has been taking place: too little attention to matters of the body has been given in cultural theory. This shows in the fact that this theory has been more or less successful at producing elaborate and even arcane descriptions of cultural production, but not very good at suggesting ways to change it that are both progressive and effective in terms of popular communication.

Though there is no direct or automatic fit between psychoanalysis, feminism or marxism, these approaches, at their best, do share a commitment to explaining reality in terms of material experience. As far as psychoanalysis is concerned, the material base of consciousness is the body of self and others, with its genetic and physiological givens, as it is experienced, interpreted and mediated through social relations. Those social relations and the discourses which ultimately express them are critical to understanding what happens in cultural formation. But they are simply not sufficient, especially if they displace considerations of the body.

What for example are we to make of the wordless gazing that takes place between parent and infant, of the sensations of comfort and merging in bodily contact in that dyad? The disembodiment of the look in cultural theory is one example of

the partial, and to an important extent misguided analysis that this approach has produced. The 'look' is not simply a form of masculinist appropriation. Its pleasure is, beneath consciousness, pre-ideological and deeply resonant with all kinds of powerful feelings. But we can't explore those feelings and ideas for their progressive mobilization if we keep looking only to language and discourse to explain culture. The same must be said for issues of pacing, rhythm, color, light—all aspects of reality that are as old as our infant selves, as powerfully connected to pleasure as our primitive libidos, and as crucial to progressive culture as are progressive ideas.

There are other mistakes we've made in rejecting the importance of the body, mistakes that hinder the formulation of clear directions for psycho-social change. Psychoanalysis teaches us that there is no such thing as human society without some form of what it has technically termed sexual repression. Weaning, toilet training and the end to libidinal parent-child symbiosis (the incest taboo) require some degree of repression of infantile sexuality. Some measure of repression is necessary to divert and neutralize human sexual drives from their first and immediate aim of instantaneous gratification in order to make them available for *sublimation* into a whole variety of endeavors—from abstract thought to nurturing support to creative and reciprocal lovemaking.

At the same time, psychoanalysis shows that an overly harsh repression of infantile sexuality creates not neutralized energy available for sublimation, but fixated energy, tied up with preventing the repressed experience from surfacing to consciousness, and therefore not free to engage in creative activity. The overly repressed personality will be incapable of questioning certain conditions, even if these make him or her unhappy, because it will be too involved with maintaining its own internal defences to understand how external social conditions are oppressive.

In addition to trying to describe consciousness and culture, there is a strategic question that those of us concerned with the self-creation of human beings free of domination must ask: what *kind* of repression of infantile and childhood sexuality is necessary in order to create human beings with the capacity for abstract thought, creative expression and loving cooperation; and what kind of repression in fact gets in the way of the growth of this kind of character? Posing this question was Marcuse's most important contribution in *Eros and Civilization*. He proposed that we call the repression-socialization of the first order "basic repression"; the second order "surplus repression." Marcuse suggested that the achievement of a society based on basic repression would entail a "re-eroticization of the body" and the end of "genital primacy"—the product of our current oedipal configurations—but he stopped short of giving these concepts more precise meanings.

Twenty years after the publication of *Eros and Civilization*, Gad Horowitz took the notions of basic and surplus repression and elaborated them in rigorous Freudian terms. By looking closely at infantile and childhood socialization process (including a survey of clinical literature—a sad omission in much psychoanalytic theorizing in cultural and political fields) he made a very important suggestion: that the repression of same sex love (the homosexual aspect of our bi-sexual potential) now central to the resolution of the incest taboo, is surplus, not basic, repression. Weaning, toilet training and certain forms of postponement of childhood erotic gratification vis-à-vis parents, because they correspond to somatic development, can be relatively painlessly assimilated providing this is achieved with care, patience and attention to appropriate pacing. The process need not be traumatic and if it is not, it allows sublimation to proceed.



The renunciation of identification with the parent of the opposite sex and the resultant renunciation of same-sex love on the other hand has no somatic counterpart and is not necessary (basic) for sublimation. In fact, quite the opposite. Because of its extremely painful nature, the repression of bi-sexuality creates rigid and crippled personalities stunted in their capacity for creative activity. The vast majority of individuals gain nothing. But the social system based on gender and economic stratification gains its own reproduction. In other words, Horowitz was able to identify strategically important directions for psycho-social change, directions which help progressive theorists to say something concretely positive about the content as well as the form of progressive work.

If we get serious about assimilating the best insights of Dinnerstein, Chodorow and Horowitz, we need no longer be restricted to abstract calls for the demise of the 'Law of the Father' at the same time as we lament its ubiquity. We no longer need to flirt with a liberal or decadent pluralism which says anything goes to avoid the harsh and somewhat totalitarian dictates of 'correct-line sexuality' and 'positive role models.' We can retain and extend our understanding of the importance of symbolic and metaphorical dimensions of culture; we can continue to defend the importance of work that explores the darker realms of (un)consciousness. But along with this, we can insist that progressive directions consist in repudiating the social and cultural repression of our androgynous potential, including its physical expression. We can demand social arrangements which validate our whole psyches and our whole bodies so that over time we can heal the intrapsychic and social splits which threaten to destroy us.

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# Gender and Destiny: George Cukor's *A Star Is Born*

by Richard Lippe

**I**N MANY ASSESSMENTS OF CUKOR'S *A STAR IS BORN* (1954) the 1937 original version is evoked in passing as a comparison but without any real critical investigation of the earlier film. This practice has produced misconceptions about both films and the relationship between them. In actual fact, they embody quite distinct ideological projects and I think it is necessary to return to the original version before discussing Cukor's handling of the material. Primarily, the reputation of the earlier film rests on its being regarded as the definitive 1930s 'Hollywood on Hollywood' film which is a sub-genre dating back to the silent cinema, e.g. *Behind The Screen* (1916), *Ella Cinders* (1926). The film's various components are harmoniously organized so that the over-all product fulfills certain Hollywood 'myths' associated with 'stardom.' Although William Wellman's contributions as director and co-author of the original story of *A Star Is Born* have been recognized as substantial, the film's sentiments are often attributed to David O. Selznick, the producer of Cukor's 1932 *What Price Hollywood?*, which, according to Ronald Haver's *David O. Selznick's Hollywood* (1980), served as a kind of guideline in the making of the Selznick/Wellman film. Despite the fact that the films have a similar structure and thematic, Haver doesn't consider *A Star Is Born* a remake of *What Price Hollywood?* but, instead, feels that what the films share is Selznick's desire to present a 'romantic' conception of Hollywood. Haver says that, in particular, in the making of *A Star Is Born*, Selznick intervened on every level of the production to ensure that the final product would serve his conception, which he felt coincided with the public's attitude towards Hollywood.

Undoubtedly, *A Star Is Born* succeeds in romanticizing Hollywood, but primarily this is achieved through the Esther Blodgett-Vicki Lester/Janet Gaynor and Norman Maine/Fredric March characters, whose eventual love for each other is used to justify the notion that a love of Hollywood and 'stardom' have an equal moral weight. While the project suggests a narcissistic stance on the part of Hollywood, the film attempts to avoid such a reading through, in particular, the construction of Esther's character and background. *A Star Is Born* begins with an extended prologue which introduces Esther as a young woman living on a farm in North Dakota, who in addition to being a 'star-struck' movie fan to the annoyance of her loutish father, aunt and brother, harbors fantasies about going to Hollywood to be a 'star' herself. When Esther is pushed into revealing her fantasy, Granny/Mae Robson, unlike the others, offers support and encourages her to attempt to realize the ambition. Granny's commitment to Esther, and her 'pioneering spirit' speech, are crucial to the film's project in aligning Esther's ambition to several American 'ideals' that underpin the Hollywood cinema.<sup>1</sup> For instance, the 'pioneering spirit' speech implies that Hollywood has replaced the West in offering a 'settling' challenge. In doing so, it collapses the distinctions between the motivations

behind the 19th Century Westward Movement and the 20th Century pursuits of the 'average' American whom Esther is meant to represent. But, according to the speech, the West and Hollywood are both the land of equal opportunity in which initiative and determination are the prime factors. Through the speech Granny and Esther are linked as pioneering women but, as Granny cautions, Esther must be strong enough to endure the 'inevitable' heartbreak her identity entails, without defeat. For Granny, it was the loss of her husband, and, analogously, Esther suffers the same experience. After Norman's death, in two sequences that roughly constitute an epilogue, Granny is re-introduced into the narrative. She functions, on one hand, as a conscience reminding Esther that she mustn't surrender to despair and abandon her original pursuit and, on the other, as family support. Indeed, in the film's last sequence, Esther is the centre of a reconstituted 'nuclear' family (Granny, the paternal studio head, Oliver Niles/Adolphe Menjou who earlier, like Granny, warned Esther about the 'price' on her ambition, and Danny McGuire/Andy Devine, the brother-like, asexual friend) who approvingly accept their 'daughter/sister' as a Hollywood 'star.'

And, of course, Esther's 'stardom' is in keeping with this depiction of Hollywood as the realization of American 'ideals.' Judging from the prologue, Esther arrives in Hollywood with no acting experience and, more importantly, the film never suggests that, despite the fact that she wins an Academy Award, Esther has a talent to be an actress. In fact, Esther doesn't display any distinguishing qualities such as talent, intelligence, or creativity; in other words, she isn't to be seen as an artist. Inadvertently, the film, in denying Esther a credible identity as an artist, reinforces the fact that Hollywood is content to promote objectified images of women, having no real interest in them as creative individuals. Instead, it is Esther's ordinariness which causes the movie-going public to embrace her. Esther's appeal is that she exemplifies the concept of the 'average' woman, and, in a sense, the film is offering her 'stardom' as an example of the democratic process. According to the audience responses depicted in the film, it is the American public who has chosen her as their representative because Esther appears to be so wholesome. And, as the character is conceived, there is no discrepancy between the on-screen image and the off-screen identity. When Esther is signed by the studio, the make-up department tries to glamorize her features but is defeated by the 'naturalness' of her face. But, by the time this scene occurs, Esther's face has already been defined as a reflection of moral integrity. On their initial meeting, Norman, after taking Esther to the apartment door, suggests that the evening could continue at his place.

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OPPOSITE—*A Star Is Born* (1954): the proposal scene.







Norman, looking into Esther's face for a response, realizes that she has a 'pureness' that makes the suggestion seem vulgar. In retraction, Norman says, "I still respect lovely things and you are lovely." The scene, which isn't in the Cukor film, has particular significance in the film's use of Esther, Norman and their relationship as a comment on 'stardom.' In it, Norman discovers an aspect of Esther which, eventually, will make her a 'star'; but, at the same time, he is discovering the 'ideal' woman who can fulfill what he has been searching for recklessly.

According to the film, there is no real conflict for Esther between being a 'star' and being Mrs. Norman Maine. Before the above-mentioned scene, *A Star Is Born* has already established an identification between Esther and Norman through her endorsement of his acting ability in the prologue but, more meaningfully, by having Esther, upon arriving in Hollywood, step into his cement footprints in front of Grauman's Chinese Theatre, which are signed "Norman Maine—Good Luck." In doing so, Esther is uniting herself to both a career and Norman Maine. And Norman, on his part, isn't troubled by Esther's ambition to be a 'star', not seeing it as a threat to their relationship. But it is Norman the film implicates as the person responsible for the unhappiness that impinges on them. In particular, prior to meeting Esther, Norman has ceased to take his obligations to 'stardom' seriously. Norman is no longer interested in work demands, but instead, in play. As his current director tells Niles, "His work is beginning to interfere with his drinking." When Niles tries to warn Norman that he's jeopardizing his career, Norman hands him a token which reads "Good for amusement only." Consequently, by the time of the marriage which brings renewed value into his life,

Norman has forfeited his 'stardom' and with it the career through which he could regain his self-respect.

In contrast to the amount of footage devoted to Esther's background and initial experiences in Hollywood, the film provides no real biographical information on Norman prior to his introduction into the narrative. Obviously, *A Star Is Born* is using Esther as its chief identification figure, which, in part, accounts for the elaboration. But considering Norman's significance to the film's over-all structure, his identity lacks necessary definition. In particular, in regard to the film's insistence that Hollywood 'stardom' is highly coveted and a rewarding experience, Norman's behavior suggests a deep dissatisfaction which needs an explanation. Clearly, the press is offered deliberately as an aspect of the industry that causes Norman to be antagonistic toward his status as a 'star.' In addition to the crass press photographer in the Hollywood Bowl sequence, there is press agent Matt Libby/Lionel Stander whose crudeness the film depicts as both humorous and, in his assault on Norman in the racetrack bar scene, vicious. However, judging from what is shown and said of Norman's public behavior, Libby's resentment isn't without reason; but, as Norman's now vulnerable situation takes precedence, the character's actions appear more barbaric than ever. Primarily, in the Selznick/Wellman version, this negative portrayal of the press as typified by Libby functions as a convenience. There is no real indication that Norman is concerned about its unethical principles beyond an immediate sense of harassment. And, more tellingly, after thoroughly denouncing the Matt Libby character and what he represents to provide a semblance of critical self-awareness about the industry, the film then endorses his position through the pub-



*A Star Is Born* (1937): Norman and Vicki announce their engagement.



lic's attitude toward Norman's death. In his final screen appearance Libby is seen sharing a joke about the drowning with a bartender; and in the mob scene outside the church after the funeral, a fan shouts to Esther, "Don't you cry dearie, he wasn't so much." Except for Esther and Niles, there is no one to express regret over Norman's demise.

The other likely source of Norman's dissatisfaction seems to be his dislike of the pretentious, which is exemplified by Anita Regis/Elizabeth Jenks. Whereas in Cukor's film the equivalent character is conceived as a vapid starlet, in the 1937 version she is a shrill and mean-spirited 'sophisticate' whose self-centredness is exposed through her insistent concern about her public embarrassment because of Norman's behavior. Considering the depiction of both the character and the relationship, Norman's involvement must be read as a symptom of his impending moral corruption, and indeed, their mutual indulgence in verbal/physical abuse in the party sequence suggests that sadistic pleasure is a motivating factor. But Anita is mainly used to represent Esther's negative counterpart, having nothing more than an artificial surface image and, in her 'class' pretensions, an anti-American spirit. Like many 1930s films, *A Star Is Born* recognizes the existence of class division but it does so to make Hollywood appear as a 'classless' environment, meaning, in actuality, that it is middle-class. For instance, while the Anita/Esther juxtaposition carries class connotations, the division is as much a city/country split as it is a distinction between persons. And, similarly, although Libby's crudity seems to be meant to suggest a 'lower-class' sensibility, the film manages to indicate in a studio cafeteria scene that Norman, through his banter with a waitress, has rapport with 'lower-class' people.

In the main, the press conflict and the Anita Regis involvement are externals and aren't used to explore Norman's personality. In the final analysis, the personality is left undeveloped beyond the film's concern about Esther's ability to introduce love into Norman's life and, with it, dignity and responsibility. Through the relationship, Norman becomes a 'gentleman,' and in doing so, acquires the necessary nobility to sacrifice himself when he discovers what Esther plans to relinquish for his sake. Actually, in the Selznick/Wellman film, Norman attains heroic status in a manner more characteristic of a male-oriented film than of the melodrama. Under Wellman's direction, the suicide is primarily presented as an honorable act making it a 'masculine' action. The scenes between Esther and Norman preceding the suicide are brief and downplay the despair and pain he would be expected to feel, given the decision. Consequently, the emphasis is on Norman's intention to secure Esther's future happiness which, he knows, has an intimate relation to 'stardom.' Norman, by committing suicide, becomes a 'hero' figure, thereby fulfilling the film's conservative conception of gender.

No doubt Wellman, who was notorious for his cultivation of a 'masculine' persona on and off the set, contributed to the conventional conception of gender-roles found in *A Star Is Born*, but Selznick, in casting the principal roles, reinforces the images.<sup>3</sup> While March didn't restrict himself to 'action' films during this period, his on-screen demeanor and presence are unambiguously 'masculine.' When March attempts to suggest, as he does in the Academy Award scene, that his sensibility is more delicate than it appears on the surface, the result is a display of self-pity, begging indulgence. And, even more importantly, in the casting of Gaynor as Esther, the film employs an actress whose screen personality was built on projecting such 'feminine' qualities as sweetness, devotion and 'innocence.' To circumvent criticism that the concept of femininity Gaynor/Esther represents might seem old-fashioned in

1937, the film itself raises the issue in Niles' comments on her potential to be a 'star' in the current climate and, earlier in the narrative, by having Esther do impressions of Garbo, Hepburn and Mae West, which serve to ridicule their 'artificial' conceptions of femininity.

If Esther's personality relates to a 'contemporary' aspect of the 1930s cinema, it is in having the kind of adventurous spirit that Hepburn's screen persona exemplified during this period. *Morning Glory* (1933) and *Stage Door* (1937) parallel *A Star Is Born* in that the heroine in both films seeks to establish herself as an actress without an initial awareness of the 'hardships' the choice entails. (Inevitably, in the Hollywood cinema, it is a female protagonist who is characterized in this naive manner. In fact, it is unlikely that Hollywood has produced a dramatic film centred on a similarly aspiring male protagonist). Nevertheless there is a strong contrast between what Gaynor and Hepburn project as actresses and personalities. As already mentioned, in *A Star Is Born* Gaynor's Esther isn't more than a 'sincere' personality, whereas in *Morning Glory* and *Stage Door* Hepburn creates characters who display the creative energies they will need to become successful actresses. In addition, in the Hepburn films the characters' development isn't predicated on *both* the attainment of career goals and fulfillment as a woman through a heterosexual 'couple' relationship. In fact, in the remarkable *Stage Door*, Terry Randall/Katherine Hepburn achieves professional and personal maturity through her relations with other would-be actresses. Considering Gaynor's screen persona, it is difficult to imagine her playing such a character because she lacks a strong enough identity to exist independent of the male reinforcement that characterizes her as a 'feminine' person.

Furthermore, there is a fundamental difference behind the motivation of the Hepburn films and the Selznick/Wellman film. Most often, in her 1930s films, Hepburn accepts the challenge of self-definition which leads to a confrontation with various forms of existing societal oppression. In contrast, in *A Star Is Born*, Esther is used to reaffirm and celebrate American values and 'ideals.' Like Granny's, Esther's initial goal of westward movement and desire to conquer a new land was male-inspired. In both cases, the women have the misfortune of losing their men in an 'accident,' but being of pioneer stock, realize that the defeat must not sway them from a commitment that goes beyond any individual tragedy. In making this decision Esther, as a woman and as an American, appears to be fulfilling a 'spiritual' obligation in accepting her reward of Hollywood 'stardom.' As an ideological product of 1930s cinema, *A Star Is Born* is a skillful variation on that decade's particular version of celebrating the American sensibility. In this regard, the film has much in common with a number of the 1930s films of directors such as Frank Capra and John Ford. To a varying degree in the comic and/or dramatic mode, these films depend on having their protagonist(s) confront and overcome an adversity so that the end goal, which exemplifies the American spirit, takes on sufficient value. In particular, with its concentration on the woman's view point, *A Star Is Born* has an affinity with Ford's *Drums Along The Mohawk* (1939) which performs a similar ideological project.

Several critics writing on Wellman have suggested that under his guidance the film becomes a critical statement on Hollywood. For example, Richard Combs, *Cinema, A Critical Dictionary* (1980), reads the film as "a satire on success in Hollywood, considerably rougher and more caustic than George Cukor's famous remake with Judy Garland." While the film contains several crude comic scenes including instances of Esther's experience as a contract player (e.g., the means by which her screen name Vicki Lester is conceived and the



biographical information Libby concocts to give Esther an exotic background), the film doesn't sustain this attitude. The Esther/Norman relationship is presented seriously and the sentiments that are conveyed through Esther about Hollywood and 'stardom' aren't given an ironic perspective. Essentially, the film, like its female protagonist, is 'sincere.' Its intention is to suggest that Hollywood, although seemingly unconventional, embodies and honors long-standing American values and traditions and, as such, deserves the public's emotional investment.

I have devoted the preceding space to an ideological reading of the Selznick/Wellman version of *A Star Is Born* because too often it is assumed that since Cukor's film is, in many respects, faithful to the original in content and narrative structure, his film carries the same implications. But, on the contrary, such a reading of Cukor's film produces very different results. Essentially, as an ideological project, the original film, in aligning an endorsement of the American value system and gender-role division, is a 'coherent' text; whereas, the remake has unresolved tensions and contradictions, which, while producing a more 'flawed' film, offers a richer text. The 'incoherence' of the 1954 film isn't attributable to a specific factor of the production but rather stems from components that uneasily co-exist.

Above all, it is Cukor's participation in the project that unhinges its ideological 'coherence.' In contrast to the earlier film, Cukor's version functions as a critical statement on gender-role division exploring the pressures the divisioning produces. Also, in addition to considering the very different sensibilities present in each project and their contributions to the final product, I think it is important to place the two films in the historical context of their production. The original film was produced in the heyday of Hollywood's classical cinema while the remake is a product of its late stages. The contradictions found in the remake are indicative of the erosion of Hollywood's self-confidence about its ability to reflect the social and cultural mores of the American public and gratify its emotional needs within the studio-star-genre system it had constructed.<sup>4</sup>

*A Star Is Born*, as a 1950s 'Hollywood on Hollywood' film, lacks the mixture of cynicism and self-criticism of internal corruption and decadence found in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), *The Bad And The Beautiful* (1952), and *The Barefoot Contessa* (1954); nor does the film, like *Singin' In The Rain* (1952), revel in a mock innocence. These films were more accurate in reflecting the contemporary attitude Hollywood was adopting toward its industry as the movie-going public began to reject the products it was producing. By the 1950s, 'stardom' was seen in terms of behind-the-scenes machinations and *A Star Is Born* isn't as relevant to the currents of the 'Hollywood on Hollywood' sub-genre as the above-mentioned films are. Instead, the film, increasingly, has been read as being 'about Hollywood' through Garland's presence in it and the relation the film has to her star image.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the amount of emphasis which has been placed on the film's presentation and usage of the Garland persona tends to give the impression that she is the film's subject matter. (Actually, this is what occurs in Garland's last film, *I Could Go On Singing* [1963], which reads as a text on her star image. See Richard Dyer's analysis of the film in the forthcoming sequel to his book *Stars*.) *A Star Is Born* is an extraordinary intersection between a star's personal and professional identity and makes a crucial contribution to the construction of Garland's star image but it is also an extremely disciplined film which integrates Garland's performance and gives precedence to her characterization. Under Cukor's direction, Garland's portrayal doesn't undermine the

narrative or imbalance the film's dramatic weight. Consistently, as the narrative demands, she and James Mason, in presence and performance, complement each other, giving dimension and depth both to their characterizations and the film's thematic concern with gender.

The remake of *A Star Is Born* was initiated by Garland and her then husband, producer Sidney Luft, who convinced Warner Brothers that it would be a suitable comeback vehicle for Garland, who hadn't made a film since being fired from MGM in 1950. Presumably, Garland and Luft, as the film's producers, were responsible for organizing the production, including the commissioning of Moss Hart to write a new screenplay. His screenplay, which Cukor in *On Cukor* (1972) calls "a really brilliant script," is an attempt, it appears, to accommodate Garland's Esther without unduly disturbing the original conception. While the changes Garland's presence demands have a crucial effect on the characterization and its connotations, Hart's screenplay, in retaining the generic conventions associated with the 'Hollywood on Hollywood' film, tends to expose, more explicitly than the original, the denigrating attitude these films take toward the Hollywood cinema. (Judging from Cukor's defense of the studio system in numerous interviews, it seems obvious that the film isn't expressing his viewpoint on the industry, its products and traditions. The genre's conventions are deeply ingrained and, most likely, Cukor accepted them without considering their implications.) For example, Esther's rendition of "The Man Who Got Away" is used to convince Norman/James Mason and, later, Oliver Niles/Charles Bickford of her extraordinary talent; yet Esther's identity as a screen actress, which according to the film is meaningful to her, is trivialized through a ridicule of the films she makes. In the "Someone At Last" sequence, the conversation between Norman and Esther preceding her parody of the number, in effect, dismisses an entire generic tradition from serious consideration, denying the richness and complexity the form can embody, as exemplified in numerous Hollywood musicals. Seemingly, Hollywood practises this kind of self-depreciation of its creative achievements to reassure the public that its products are nothing more than 'entertainment.' By characterizing the process of movie-making and the end product as trivialities, Hollywood gives the impression that no real labor is at stake; therefore, in return, no labor, and in particular mental labor, is demanded from the viewer.

While Hart's screenplay is about Hollywood in the above sense, it doesn't use Esther and her experience to celebrate Hollywood as a contemporary example of American democracy. As well as abandoning the original version's prologue, Hart's screenplay makes Esther a person of genuine talent. Hence, Esther's 'stardom' isn't predicated on her being an 'average' person. And, in the 1954 version, the scene in which Norman 'discovers' Esther occurs when he hears her sing "The Man Who Got Away." Norman's initial commitment to Esther is based on his perception of her as a singer/actress who has, as he calls it, "star" quality. The film doesn't suggest that Esther's attractiveness for Norman resides in her moral integrity or in her ability to offer him redemption through love. In consequence, the film isn't producing a mere duplication of the Esther/Norman relationship as it is used in the original version. On the surface neither Esther nor Norman appears to be a complex character but, as conceived, there is the suggestion that their actions, at times, are motivated by emotional needs, desires and fears that are beyond their conscious comprehension.

In *The Hollywood Musical* (1982) Jane Feuer, in concluding her insightful analysis of the genre's mechanics, produces a star image reading of *A Star Is Born* contending that various



aspects of Garland's persona, filmic and extra-filmic, are incorporated into the film through certain musical numbers and the identities of Esther and Norman. While her reading of the film is productive, it encourages the blurring of the distinction between presence and performance.

In its original conception, none of the songs Garland performs was to disrupt the film's dramatic action; instead, their function was to move forward and comment on the Esther/Norman relationship with Esther finding it progressively difficult to use song as a form of communication to reach Norman. For Cukor, the concept offered the challenge of organizing the songs in relation to the film's dramatic flow.<sup>6</sup> Cukor, repeatedly, handles this challenge with delicacy and boldness. For example, the brief wedding night sequence which takes place in a dingy motel cabin has Norman, on hearing Esther's new hit song "It's a New World" on a coin-operated radio, ask her to sing it "to kind of celebrate." The preceding casual mood of the sequence disappears as Esther, after protesting, begins to sing it to Norman. Cukor doesn't resort to a cut to 'introduce' Esther's performance of the song. In fact, the entire rendition of "It's a New World" is filmed in a tight two-shot. As the song concludes, Norman and Esther embrace and the sequence ends. While the use of the number seems conventional, it carries significance beyond the sentiments the lyrics express. Norman, with the request, is, simultaneously, celebrating Esther's talent and his love for her. (The Selznick/Wellman version doesn't contain a wedding night sequence; instead, it has a comic honeymoon sequence in which Esther and Norman, while driving a trailer through the desert, take on, like an 'average' couple, their respective roles in domestic life.) Before "It's a New World", Cukor used Esther's studio recording session of "What I'm Here For" as the context in which Norman proposes. Again, the song's lyrics function as commentary on the relationship but it is worth noting that Norman's proposal occurs during the playback of Esther's recording as it serves to foreground her professional identity in relation to Norman's commitment of his affection. Cukor reinforces this by having the technicians accidentally record the proposal and then let the couple hear it as part of the playback of the song.

The most striking use of song in the film is the placement of the "Lose That Long Face" number. In the preceding Academy Award sequence, Norman, drunk, interrupts Esther's acceptance speech to make a job appeal to the industry members present and, inadvertently, slaps Esther across the face. The sequence concludes with Esther guiding Norman back to their table and his asking for a drink. Cukor cuts to the studio where Esther is about to perform the optimistic song in an elaborate production number. Esther, in costume, is introduced sitting in front of her dressing room mirror having a finishing make-up touch applied. As the camera moves in to frame Esther in medium close-up, she turns to reveal her made-up face which is that of an androgynous-looking youth. Make-up and costume combine to create a cheerful image that Esther, as her verbal and facial responses indicate, is straining to match. The shot is followed by several brief on-set shots but, as Esther and the chorus begin "Lose That Long Face", the number becomes integrated into the film itself. Without transition, Cukor switches both generic convention and the emotional register of the film. As a musical production number, "Lose That Long Face" has an insistent brashness to match the song's upbeat lyrics and, defiantly, the number functions to produce elation. But, with its conclusion, Cukor returns to the on-set environment; Esther is told to "take it easy for a bit" and retires to her dressing room. When Niles unexpectedly enters, Esther, as in the introduction shot, is sitting in front of

the mirror. As the conversation turns to Norman, Esther can no longer contain herself and breaks down. Garland, in a single long-take shot, produces one of the film's most highly charged dramatic moments within the scene. Cukor, in the film's first sequence, established, with Norman's on and off stage behavior, an emotionally intense and edgy tone which *A Star Is Born* retains throughout. The dressing-room scene concludes with Niles saying that he might be able to offer Norman a film job and Esther, ecstatically grateful, returning to the set. On-set, Esther repeats for a close camera set-up the affirmative end refrain of "Lose That Long Face" but her performance does not take place in Norman's presence and, unlike the film's other songs, isn't a shared experience. Cukor's juxtaposition of the musical comedy number and melodrama in the sequence is stunning; furthermore, their effectiveness is increased through the following sequence which involves Norman's breakdown.

Unfortunately, the complex emotional pattern Cukor creates through the interaction between song and narrative is jeopardized by the "Born in a Trunk" number which, as is well-known, was shot by the studio after Cukor left the project and inserted into the film against his wishes. (In *On Cukor*, the number's production credits are given in full.) Presumably, Warner Brothers convinced Garland and Luft that audiences were anticipating Garland in a 'musical' and, as the film stood, it wouldn't satisfy their expectations, but the number upsets the film's structural conception and its dramatic flow. Because of the number's 'narrative' construction, length and 'film-within-film' presentation, it becomes a sequence unit; but it lacks contextual references and its existence can't be justified in such a highly organized film. It is disconcerting that the recent 'restored' version of *A Star Is Born* (see Ronald Haver's article "A Star Is Born Again" in *American Film*, July-August, 1983) retains the sequence. Obviously, "Born in a Trunk" has become a part of definitive 1950s Garland and the general public would have protested its exclusion but, since the number forms a self-contained sequence, it could have been shown before the film proper. (As Feuer suggested in her reading of the film, the number's referent is Garland; its function is to recapitulate her identification with and survival in 'show business.') In addition to creating a formal disturbance and an explicit emotional distraction, the "Born in a Trunk" number evokes the musical comedy tradition that Cukor was attempting to avoid and it makes the film appear more conventional than it is.

In critical writings on the film, *A Star Is Born* has been identified generically as a film 'about Hollywood' and as a musical but there has been no real consideration of the film's central relationship to the melodrama.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, Martin Scorsese's 'musical' *New York, New York* (1977), which is, as I argue in *Movie 31/32* (forthcoming), indebted to Cukor's *A Star Is Born*, has been ignored by the critics as a melodrama despite the fact that, in recent years, theoretical investigation has stressed the complex cross-currents underlying film genres. While the concept of genre can be valuable in analyzing the vast output of the industry, it is important to realize that Hollywood genres function to produce variation in addressing shared ideological and cultural concerns promoted through its cinema. (Steve Neale's *Genres* [1982] offers a provocative analysis of genre from this perspective.) Although Scorsese's creative use of various generic components and their emotional ramifications is found in films preceding *New York, New York*, the film was judged a 'musical' and this categorization dictated the critical viewpoint taken toward it. No doubt, Scorsese, like Cukor, was concerned about the film's 'musical' aspects, but his subject matter is, as it is in



Cukor's film, the characters' gender-identities and the unresolvable conflicts these identities produce in the context of the 'couple' relationship. The film's central thematic conflicts with the traditional conception of the 'musical' film which depends on the resolving of differences (sexual, class) to produce a 'happy ending.'

As I said in the discussion of the original version of *A Star Is Born*, the film's antecedent is Cukor's *What Price Hollywood?* In that film, an aspiring actress, Mary Evans/Constance Bennett achieves 'stardom' through the help of Max Carey/Lowell Sherman, a Hollywood director whose career is declining because of his excessive drinking. While the film is centred on Mary's personal and professional life, Carey's presence is given considerable dramatic weight but, curiously, there is no attempt to explore the character. Carey's alcoholism is unexplained and the nature of his feelings toward Mary are left obscure. Most striking, the film refuses to make any reference to Carey as a sexual person. In its reticence, *What Price Hollywood?* seems to imply that Carey's problems are of a sexual nature; and, considering that he is depicted as having no interest in Mary on either the romantic or sexual level, Carey's sexual orientation inevitably becomes ambiguous. Under Cukor's direction, Carey, of the film's major characters, is the most vulnerable and sympathetic and his suicide scene has a forcefulness that overshadows the remainder of the narrative. (Cukor, in the Carlos Clarens book, *Cukor* [1976], comments on Sherman's contribution to the film. The remarks are a good example of his perceptive understanding of how the personality and presence of an actor functions in relation to characterization.) Conceivably, the film's vagueness about his identity

and personal crisis may have been an attempt to avoid taking a 'serious' stance on his sexual situation. As Vito Russo points out in *The Celluloid Closet* (1981), 'gay' characters in 1930s films were used, in general, as comic relief; most often, these characters were presented as being non-sexual which was a coding to indicate their lack of interest in heterosexual relations. In addition, a film about Hollywood 'stardom' can easily accommodate an alcoholic director as a principal character; whereas, to deal with him as a sexual deviant automatically makes 'sexuality' the film's subject matter.

In *What Price Hollywood?* Carey can't be completely integrated into the narrative because he's gay. (The film's production predates the censorship codes initiated in 1934 through the Hays Code and the Legion of Decency but, interestingly, Carey is not identified as gay. It is an indication of Hollywood's long-standing cautiousness about openly acknowledging the existence of an alternative sexual lifestyle.) His sexuality makes it impossible to pair him with the heroine in a heterosexual couple; additionally, it undermines the option of employing the character, convincingly, as a 'father' figure who functions to re-affirm the patriarchal order. As the character disrupts both the film's formal symmetry and its ideological position, the script resorts to having Carey commit suicide to resolve these difficulties. Conveniently, the suicide eliminates the character from the narrative; and the film, without having to give an explanation, can rely on the conventional belief that to be gay leads to anguish and despair. With *A Star Is Born*, Wellman and Robert Carson performed a major revision in the story through the creation of a romantic relationship between Norman (Max Carey) and Esther (Mary Evans). It

'Somewhere there's a someone.'







Before the screen test.

gives structural balance and emotional cohesion to the material, and although Esther is still the centre of the story, Norman, and in particular, his suicide, become more 'heroic.' The reasons behind Norman's alcoholism remain obscure in the Selznick/Wellman film, but the conception of the character leaves no doubt about his 'masculinity'—a fact which contributes to making the film more 'unified' than either Cukor version. As I mentioned earlier, Hart's adjustments in adapting the screenplay were to accommodate Garland's Esther; essentially, Norman was taken intact from Wellman's conception. Thus, Hart's screenplay leaves unanswered the crucial question of what is motivating Norman's self-destructive behaviour. The 1937 version, through its self-assurance about the 'positiveness' of the Esther/Norman relationship, manages to gloss over the question. Cukor's film addresses it, and although this is done indirectly, it becomes a central issue in the narrative.

In previous paragraphs, I have mentioned that Cukor's film raises the issue of gender. *A Star Is Born* does so without the foregrounding found in earlier Cukor films like *A Woman's Face* (1941) or several of the Hepburn films. In addition to considering the films as individual projects, there is the factor that Crawford and Hepburn have screen personas which are self-consciously about gender identity. In a number of Crawford and Hepburn films, their gender-role transgressions become the source of the narratives' tensions and conflicts. In contrast, Garland could express, as Richard Dyer ("Judy Garland and Gay Men," the sequel to *Stars* [1986]) coins it,

"gender androgyny." Essentially, Dyer sees Garland giving expression to androgyny in certain musical comedy numbers such as "A Couple of Swells" which she performs with Fred Astaire in *Easter Parade* (1948). Dyer, in discussing the 'tramp look' which Garland took from the film's number and used in concerts and television shows, says, "... in the tramp we could identify with someone who has left questions of sexuality behind in an androgyny that is not so much in-between (marked as both feminine and masculine) as without gender." As Dyer suggests in his marvelous reading of Garland's star image, the ragamuffin look in "Lose That Long Face" is a variation on the tramp outfit. But, as in the Crawford and Hepburn films, gender concepts are shown to inform both the professional and personal aspects of the characters' lives; and, especially in *A Star Is Born*, their internalization is evident. Although, eventually, the characters confront the pressure involved in fulfilling these concepts, there is no real awareness on their part of the source of the oppression. Instead, while the characters feel that they failed themselves and each other, it becomes obvious that the expectations and demands entailed by their respective gender-roles are overwhelming them.

For an understanding of the construction of gender-roles in our society, it is necessary to discuss the physical and psychical components involved. On the physical level, biological factors relating to reproduction account for the division of the sexes into male and female. Culturally, the physical difference between the sexes has been overlaid with behavioral character-



istics which are defined as gender-specific. Of these characteristics, the chief one is that the male is active and the female is passive. The assumption that these characteristics were 'natural' wasn't really contested until Freud advanced his theories. According to Freudian theory, all human beings are constitutionally bisexual at birth, responding sexually to, and identifying with, both sexes. Yet, in the early stages of childhood, the Oedipal phase occurs in which the child, unconsciously, begins to desire the parent of the opposite biological sex and wants to eliminate the same sex parent. (Freud assumed this phenomenon to be universal and disregarded the immediate social forces that give shape to both the conscious and unconscious.) The child resolves the Oedipus complex through an identification with the parent of the same sex while temporarily renouncing the opposite sex since, in adulthood, the opposite sex will be reclaimed as a sexual object. It is through the Oedipus complex that the child learns to adopt the sexual characteristics of the same sex parent. The process entails the repression of bisexuality into the unconscious in favor of a single sex identification. For the female subject, the repression of the bisexual means the denial of an aggressive or active sexual identity which will prepare her to fulfill the submissive mother/wife role; consequently, for the male subject, the passive is denied at the expense of the active which is given expression through the father/husband role.

Again, according to Freudian theory, what is repressed into the unconscious continues to exist and seeks recognition. The repression of 'undesirable' impulses is only maintained through great psychical effort which, nevertheless, has lapses allowing these impulses a chance to assert themselves. Dreams are one means the unconscious uses to communicate its desires. The more powerfully these desires are blocked, the more extreme are the measures the unconscious takes to find expression. Hysteria, in a physical and/or psychical manifestation, is one of the more extreme forms of the unconscious expressing itself. Actually, the notion of hysteria didn't originate with Freud but derives from the ancient Greeks who thought it was solely a female disease traceable to uterus disorders, and, essentially, Freud formulated his theories about hysteria from the study of female patients whom, he found, were repressing strong sexual energies. But, at the present time, hysteria is no longer conceived of as being unique to female subjects, although its causation is still aligned to the conscious denial of sexual energy and drives.

Obviously, in a patriarchal society like ours, the repression of bisexual or homosexual impulses is exacerbated by the society's demand to have male (active) and female (passive) roles clearly defined and fulfilled to ensure male domination. Under such conditions, the unconscious impulses can cause anxieties and fears about the inability to function within a gender-role, leading to hysterical symptoms. In *A Star Is Born*, both Norman and Esther, to varying degrees, appear to be under tension in attempts to enact their respective gender-roles, with the pressure intensifying a need to succeed in the roles. In particular, the oppressive expectations and obligations these roles entail are given definitions through the marriage which, as a social institution, is used to perpetuate gender roles and division. The result of the tension, in both characters, is a tendency toward behavioral excesses which are a symptom of hysteria and, under Cukor's direction, Mason and Garland are encouraged to display emotional excess. To an extent, Cukor's film can be read as a text on repression and hysteria, linking it expressly to the melodrama.

In contrast to the 1937 version, the film's first sequence is centred on Norman and, in several instances, it offers revealing insights into his behavior. In particular, the sequence

alludes to Norman having anxieties about his 'masculinity.' Cary Grant was the original choice for the role and given the complexity of his screen persona in terms of gender—see Andrew Britton's *Cary Grant: Comedy and Male Desire* (1983)—seems to be ideal casting. Nevertheless, Mason, in addition to giving a sensitive and intelligent performance, can convey, as he does in the film, an intense emotionalism which threatens to consume his social image of reserve and control. Again, in *Bigger Than Life* (1956), in which Mason also succumbs to the pressures (imposed by masculine identity), this tension is fully employed. In the opening sequences of *A Star Is Born*, in the backstage encounter with Matt Libby/Jack Carson, Norman 'humorously' remarks that "Mr. Libby looks after me like a fond mother with a good sense of double entry bookkeeping." He is characterizing their relationship as that of parent/child and, in addition, expressing his resentment that Libby can handle responsibilities. Or, later, in meeting Esther after the benefit, Norman immediately projects romantic (he draws a pierced heart on the wall containing their initials) and then sexual connotations onto their encounter. When Esther's friend Danny McGuire/Tommy Noonan attempts to intervene, Norman treats him as a rival and threatens physical violence. The sequence is used to indicate that Norman's drinking is bound to a need to assuage his precariously repressed anxieties and it is crucial to reading Norman's subsequent responses to Esther and the relationship. As the following Coconut Grove sequence indicates, Norman's conscious intention in pursuing Esther is sexual, yet, after seeing and hearing her perform "The Man Who Got Away" at the Downbeat Club, he abruptly adopts a paternal image. (Again, Feuer sees the number solely as a Garland referent and argues that, contextually, its intensity isn't warranted at this point in the narrative; on the contrary, the "Man Who Got Away" number and its placement have a dramatic function. Cukor is establishing, in addition to Esther's 'star' talent, her emotionality, which, later, produces the near hysteria Esther attempts to contain as the relationship disintegrates but which is given full expression in its aftermath through the numbers. In effect, Cukor is developing characterization and, in the context of a 'musical' film, its placement and usage is both unconventional and imaginative.)

Undoubtedly, Norman's reaction entails the excitement of 'discovering' Esther's talent and a desire to see it given recognition but, in the immediate situation, it also serves to deactivate the sexual implications of his pursuit. Furthermore, Norman, in convincing Esther that he can contribute to the realization of her career aspirations, initiates, in effect, a parent-child relationship between them. Through his commitment to Esther's talent, Norman can assume a responsible role, becoming a 'father' figure. In Cukor's film, Norman doesn't cast Esther as his leading lady, making her an on-screen lover. Instead, he guides Esther's progression at the studio through various stages until she achieves 'stardom,' while Esther, falling in love, blurs the tenuous distinctions between the professional and personal spheres, wanting Norman as a father/husband figure. For Esther, Norman decides to prove himself "... absolutely dependable on all occasions," but, when his career fails, the pressure the failure produces leads to feelings of inadequacy. Norman becomes increasingly susceptible to anxieties about his lack of ability to sustain the role of father/husband in the marriage. These anxieties culminate when a delivery man assumes that he is "Mr. Lester"; Norman retreats into drink.

Effectively, Cukor precedes the scene in which this occurs with the "Someone at Last" number. Esther, arriving home late from the studio and sensing Norman's pretense of con-



tentment about his day, gives an impromptu performance of the song in their living-room to alleviate the tension Norman is trying to suppress. Esther 'visualizes' the number through her imaginative use of objects in the room and draws Norman into participating as an active observer who 'sees' it as a filmic spectacle. Contextually, the number functions as indirect commentary on the relationship in several ways. Unwittingly, Esther, through the performance, is making reference to *her* career and performing talents; in a way, she is contributing to Norman's sense of humiliation about his present situation. In addition, Esther's decision to entertain Norman suggests that she is, unconsciously, assuming a parent/child relation between them feeling the need to coax him into a better mood. Finally, the song itself functions as an ironic statement on their present relationship. As the song's title suggests, its lyrics are about the search to find *the someone* to become "someone at last." In celebrating romantic and sexual love, it depends on strict gender-role definitions.

While both the 1937 and 1954 versions employ the formal symmetry found in classical filmmaking, e.g., the ascending/descending career movements, Cukor uses the patterns to elaborate on the protagonists' identities and explore the tensions their relationship produces. (Cukor's film has the more pronounced 'doubling' structure: the opening and closing Shrine Auditorium sequences; two balcony scenes in which Norman and Esther make commitments to each other; Norman's two interruptions of Esther on stage occurring before and after the marriage; two bedroom scenes, early and late in the film, in which Norman is referred to as child-like.) For instance, with the failure of Norman's career, it becomes evident that Esther, too, is anxious about satisfying her own gender role in the relationship. As the "Someone at Last" number indicates, Esther's responses contribute to the underlying anxieties that inform Norman's behavior. Progressively, Esther realizes her inability to understand his needs, but instead of accepting the reality of her position, Esther displays a mounting desperation to fulfill her obligations to Norman and the relationship. In confronting the pressures the marriage produces, Esther begins to rely on enacting maternal impulses; and, for both protagonists, these impulses produce a series of disabling reactions. Whereas, initially, Norman used alcohol to check his 'masculine' anxieties, after the marriage the retreat into alcohol leads to his employing public degradations to confirm his irresponsible behavior. In addition, for Norman, each of these occurrences increasingly lowers his self-respect. Yet, when Norman makes an attempt to salvage his self-respect, he is denied the opportunity through Esther's actions. In the courtroom scene, despite Norman's signalling to her to remain silent after the sentencing, she intervenes. In accepting responsibility for Norman's future behavior, Esther is actually acknowledging his helplessness and need of her maternal care. Significantly, in the original version there is no indication that Norman resists the roles Esther is assigning them; the assumption seems to be that the scene is another illustration of Esther's virtuousness. But, in Cukor's film, the scene functions to contribute to the total despair Norman experiences when, later, he overhears the discussion between Esther and Niles and learns of her intentions to devote herself to his recovery and needs. Norman's subsequent suicide can no longer be read simply as a noble act to ensure the continuation of Esther's career. For Norman, there are no longer any illusions left that he can be a 'responsible' person. But, in contrast, Esther still harbors illusions about herself, Norman and the relationship. She refuses to acknowledge Niles' observations on Norman's deterioration and his conviction that it is impossible for them to begin anew. Esther's belief in the

possibility is substantiated through the song she chooses, when Norman, before taking leave for a swim, asks her to sing around the house as she used to. As Norman walks toward the ocean and into the water to drown himself, Esther is heard singing "It's a New World." As a statement on the potential of the relationship, the song is as ironic as it is poignant. The marriage began with Esther singing it and it now serves as an accompaniment to Norman's death; Esther's choice of the song confirms our sense of her capacity for self-delusion and of Norman's recognition that a 'new world' no longer exists.

The sequences that follow the suicide are, in narrative movement and resolution, faithful to the 1937 version but Cukor remains, as much as possible within these demands, consistent to his inflection of the material. After Norman's death, Esther isolates herself in the beach house and appears to be lapsing into melancholy. As depicted by Garland, her grief implies a suicidal despair which suggests that Esther, beyond a conscious sense of loss, has feelings of self-reproach. In the light of her previous anxious behavior, the self-reproach, undoubtedly, is bound to her 'failure' in the role she undertook in the relationship as Norman's mother/wife. When Danny confronts her about the benefit appearance, Esther's hysterical outburst is silenced only after he convinces her that she's denying what Norman loved. Of Norman, Danny says: "... he was a drunk and he wasted his life but he loved you and took an enormous pride in the one thing in his life that wasn't a waste. You." His assessment of Norman functions to make Esther resume a responsibility toward Norman which, at present, is necessary to her emotional survival. In the concluding sequence, Esther, at the benefit, expresses her love and commitment to Norman through identifying herself as "Mrs. Norman Maine." In Cukor's film, the identification speech carries a double connotation. On one hand, it is Esther's means to acknowledge the unrealized potential of the relationship which has been based on a mutual respect and affection, but on the other, the speech has an ironic and tragic dimension. Esther, as a woman and as a creative artist, is using her identity to give tribute to the traditional marriage union which has served disastrously to reinforce traditional gender divisions. In an attempt to honor the institution and the roles it canonizes, Norman has been destroyed and Esther brought to the brink of despair. Interestingly, Cukor doesn't use Esther's identification speech as the final shot of the film. (While, technically, the final shot in the Selznick/Wellman film reinstates the framing screenplay device, the film's penultimate shot is of Esther, in close-up, saying, "Hello, everybody . . . This is Mrs. Norman Maine.") In fact, the final shot, in which the camera cranes back from Esther to place her centre stage in front of the audience, doesn't offer a fixed reading. Similarly, it is impossible to determine the precise significance of "It's a New World" on the soundtrack. Cukor, in employing such an equivocal final image/sound, disengages the viewer, to an extent, from the obvious ideological project the sequence entails. Actually, the sequence's introductory *mise-en-scène* has already undermined the ideological implications in the material. The sequence begins with a backstage shot in which the camera tracks left from a group of showgirls to performers dressed to resemble figures from a Picasso 'Rose Period' painting. The track, which is accompanied by melancholy guitar music, reveals several figures who, in make-up and costume, look androgynous. In the second shot other Picasso-like figures are seen but the track is reversed. The camera movement stops as Esther and Danny enter the area but the camera begins to track backward as they move toward the wall on which Norman had drawn the pierced heart. As Esther sees it and remembers, there is a violent outburst of guitar music on



the soundtrack. Through the two shots, Cukor, momentarily, evokes the denial of the gender-role definitions through the presence of the androgynous figures.

Although *What Price Hollywood?* and *A Star Is Born*, as films 'about Hollywood,' are grouped in Lambert's book, there is no real discussion on the possible levels of continuity between the two. Yet, I think, in comparing the films, it is necessary to consider, in particular, Max Carey in relation to Cukor's conception of Norman Maine. For instance, both characters have similar qualities such as wit, sensitivity, and intelligence; and in neither film is it suggested that, professionally, these men lack the creative talents their careers demand. But, more importantly, it is arguable that Carey's gayness infiltrates the later film. There are several scenes in the film which give substance to the notion that Cukor and/or Hart, in rewriting the screenplay, imply that Norman's anxiety is traceable to unconscious gay or bisexual impulses. Obviously, in suggesting the film has a sub-text centred on Norman's repression of his sexual drives, I am not attempting to claim that the film is restricting the oppressiveness of gender roles to the sexual deviant; the socially constructed gender roles within patriarchy restrict everyone. In the initial Coconut Grove sequence, Norman, searching for Esther after the benefit, questions the head waiter, Bruno, about the Glenn Williams Orchestra. After telling Norman that the orchestra has been replaced by a rumba band because of the late hour and advising him about the possible whereabouts of the orchestra's musicians, Bruno asks, "Would you like a table, sir?" to which Norman replies, "Not unless you wish to rumba with me, Bruno." Later, in the sanatorium sequence, Norman has a burly male attendant whom he calls "Cuddles," and during the course of the sequence Norman, repeatedly, implies that they have a romantic 'couple' relationship. After Niles departs, the sequence concludes as Norman says, "All right, Cuddles, alone at last." Clearly, in these scenes, Norman is joking, but to cite Freud's concept of the function of jokes, it is possible to interpret the statements as Norman giving expression to his repressed homosexual desires. These 'jokes' assert the desire and, simultaneously, make it appear ridiculous. Although the dialogue in the sanatorium sequence is taken verbatim from the Wellman/Carson screenplay, the earlier sequence is an addition to the 1954 version; and, in explicitly acknowledging that there is no explanation for Norman's behavior, the film encourages speculation about his motives. In the "Lose That Long Face" on-set dressing-room scenes, Esther begs Niles, as a long-time acquaintance of Norman's, to explain to her what "... makes him want to destroy himself." When Niles can't give an explanation, Esther goes on to say "... I thought I was the answer for Norman ... but love isn't enough for him." While the scene indicates that no one, including Norman, has the 'answer,' its placement within the film is suggestive—the scene is almost immediately followed by the sanatorium sequence.

Considering Cukor's sensitivity to these dynamics in dealing with the relationship, the characters appear to have been conceived as lacking full comprehension of the motives behind their response. In any case, during the early 1950s, it would have been impossible to define a character as a latent homosexual because of censorship codes. As is well-known, from the enforcement of the Hays Code in the mid-1930s onward, it wasn't an uncommon strategy for filmmakers to resort to implication to avoid censorship problems. In another film of the same year, *The Barefoot Contessa*, which is also centred on Hollywood and 'stardom,' Joseph Mankiewicz was forced to alter his conception of the Rossano Brazzi character; originally, the character was a homosexual but in the film version

he suffers from impotence caused by a war wound. Mankiewicz, discussing *The Barefoot Contessa* in *Interview* (November, 1981), says: "This was to be my version of a Hollywood Cinderella tale in which the beautiful young film Cinderella meets her prince and he's homosexual. Or I was willing to settle for just plain impotent. It wouldn't have been nearly as exciting as having him be a homosexual but the Legion of Decency and the censorship bureau of the 48 states really wrote the films. There was such a mass of non-knowledge, of ignorance about Hollywood and who made the films and what they were about." It is because Cukor was working in such a climate when making *A Star Is Born* that I am raising the potential significance of implication in the film's presentation of Norman. In addition, in contrast to the 1937 version which emphasizes Norman's responses to 'stardom' as the focal point of his character, Cukor's film, in defining Norman, is more tentative and, I feel, subjective. Cukor produces a less 'coherent' character, but Norman becomes a more compelling and complex person and his movement toward self-destruction is as senseless as it is tragic.

Actually, the entire film conveys the impression of being a very personal effort on Cukor's part and I think it is one of his finest achievements. *A Star Is Born* is a remarkably rigorous investigation into the personal and social tensions gender-identity concepts produce within heterosexual relations. These relations are conceived as social institutions through various concepts, e.g., romantic love, the couple, the nuclear family and 'home,' which function to reinforce gender-role divisions. In subject matter, the film generically is dealing with issues central to the tradition of the melodrama. (Michael Walker's article, "Melodrama and the American Cinema" [*Movie*, 29/30, Summer, 1982] is a useful attempt to give definition to the genre in its broad and more specific usage.) Although the film has been neglected in this area of study, I think *A Star Is Born* relates to some of the major melodramas of Hollywood's late classical period. To take an example: Norman, in his alcoholism and self-destructive behavior, has a strong resemblance to Kyle Hadley/Robert Stack in Douglas Sirk's *Written On The Wind* (1956). As melodramas the two films are of particular interest in having a vulnerable male protagonist who is as central to the narratives' exploration of patriarchal sexual structuring as his female counterpart, who, in Sirk's film, is Marilee Hadley/Dorothy Malone. In both instances, the male characters have anxieties about their 'manhood' which leads to a sense of individual worthlessness; each makes an investment in another person (Kyle in Mitch Wayne/Rock Hudson, and later, in Lucy Hadley/Lauren Bacall), who, unwittingly, contributes to an intensification of their self-destructive behavior through a foregrounding of the expectations a 'masculine' role entails; the characters are in a privileged social/economic position through fame/Norman and wealth/Kyle but, instead of fulfilling their needs and desires, these positions act as oppressive agents. In addition, Cukor, like Sirk, uses a highly self-conscious mise-en-scène which tends to undercut a 'realism' effect. The shared stylistic manoeuvres include a selective color schema, the use of histrionic performance, and, at times, a 'dramatic' lighting of set-pieces and actors, which call attention to soundstage shooting control. Furthermore, as narratives, both films have a circular pattern and employ an ambiguous 'happy ending' resolution. In pointing out similarities between *A Star Is Born* and *Written On The Wind*, I am not attempting to diminish their considerable difference as projects or suggest that Cukor and Sirk are interchangeable. Rather, my aim is to place Cukor's film within the context that will best illuminate its thematic.





'The man that got away.'

## FOOTNOTES

1. In *Movies About Movies/Chicago 77*, Bill Horrigan, in discussing the 1937 version, makes reference to the connection Granny draws between herself, Esther and the 'frontier.' He suggests the "... inclination to ennoble Hollywood by recourse to historical analogy seems very much to derive, again, from Selznick ..."
2. Gaynor's Oscar-sanctified performance in *Sunrise* (1927), is relevant here. Most often, Gaynor, replacing Mary Pickford as 'America's Sweetheart,' played, as she did in *Sunrise*, the child-woman who manages to triumph over adversities through a combination of wholesomeness, sincerity and naivety. In the early '30s, Gaynor tried to force Fox Studios into giving her more varied characterizations but, as her previous films were profitable, she met their resistance. By the mid-'30s, Gaynor's diminishing popularity was attributed to the fact that she lacked the glamor and sex-appeal of actresses such as Garbo, Dietrich and Mae West. While *A Star Is Born* gave Gaynor a more adult characterization than usual, she employs, in essence, the persona the public had associated with her from past films. Throughout her career, Gaynor's image was antithetical to the concept of the 'manufactured' personality.
3. For an example of the persona Wellman cultivated see Richard Schickel's *The Men Who Made the Movies* (Atheneum, 1975). Both Schickel's introduction and the interview stress Wellman's 'Wild Bill' image.
4. Whatever their original intention, the Jon/Peters/Barbra Streisand version of *A Star Is Born* (1976) becomes a celebration of Streisand's switch from pop to rock music containing numerous musical numbers which in the main are irrelevant to the narrative's concerns. (Compare the way in which the musical numbers are fully integrated into the narrative in Cukor's film.) Although the film retains the basic narrative premises of the earlier versions, it is, under the producers' guidance, closer to a remake of *Funny Girl* (1968) with Streisand again playing the strong woman who falls in love with a weak man. As in *Funny Girl*, Streisand isn't concerned about the oppressiveness of gender-role identity but instead laments the fact that she's unable to hold on to her man. (Although in certain respects more progressive, Streisand's *Yentl* (1983) is fundamentally another variant on this syndrome.) Frank Pier-

son's direction isn't more than perfunctory and the film's visual conception is an uneasy mixture of cinéma vérité-like footage and the Hollywood musical at its most Broadway brassy.

5. With *A Star Is Born*, Garland was attempting to move beyond her identification with the musical comedy which had been established through her MGM films. Cukor, in *On Cukor*, discussing Garland, says: "She's never played a serious part before this, she told me she'd never wept before on the screen, never screamed, never had a big scene."; later, he comments: "A lot of people in musical comedy are like mimics or impersonators, which is not real acting. They promise more than they deliver. You think, 'If only they could play out a scene how good they'd be,' and very often you're wrong. But Judy Garland was a very original and resourceful actress."
6. *Young At Heart*, another 1954 Warner Brothers film, had a similar project. The film is a remake of a nonmusical film, *Four Daughters* (1938), that, while incorporating songs for its two musical stars, Doris Day and Frank Sinatra, retains the original narrative's dramatic conflicts, although the film reverses the resolution and has a 'happy ending' more in keeping with its association to the musical.
7. Thomas Elsaesser in "Tales of Sound and Fury" (*Monogram*, No. 4, 1972) and Douglas Sirk, *Sirk on Sirk* (Cinema One, 1972), call attention to the fact that melodrama, in its original usage, implied 'music and drama.' Elsaesser, in discussing the creative usage of music and drama, restricts his examples to films that employ background music which produces a rhythm that functions in conjunction to the narrative either underscoring or counterpointing the dramatic flow. Essentially, the same principal is being employed in the Cukor and Scorsese films and, arguably, in a more challenging conception for both the filmmaker and viewer, since it is also embodied in diegetic musical performance. As performance, it may be read solely by the viewer as a musical number external to characterization and narrative development, with the loss of its emotional connotations to the film's over-all structure.

NOTE: Gavin Lambert's interview book *On Cukor*, to which reference is made in the text, was published in 1972 by G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York.





*The Year of Living Dangerously*: the romantic couple.

# The Other Dream: The Year of Living Dangerously

by Lori Spring

## Introduction

**T**HE "INCOHERENT TEXT" IS THE TERM Robin Wood uses to describe those films "in which the drive towards the ordering of experience has been visibly defeated" but of which "the interest lies partly in their incoherence." He says of such films:

They are neither successful nor negligible. It is also of their nature that if they were *more* successful (at least in realising what are generally perceived to be their conscious projects), they would be proportionately less interesting. Ultimately, they are works that do not know what they want to say.<sup>1</sup>

Peter Weir's *The Year of Living Dangerously* does not appear to know what it wants to say: the film creates a very powerful, even attractive, image of 'Other-ness,' investing it with wisdom and compassion, imbuing it with both Western and Third World characteristics, but simultaneously compromises this image, possibly to the point of extinguishing its power. This process of neutralizing its own presentation of 'Other-ness' appears to be at the basis of the movie's 'incoherence,' of its defeat in "the drive towards the ordering of experience."

It is important to find ways of understanding the enigma embodied in 'incoherent' movies such as this one: the emotions it evokes in me appear to be authentic and deeply felt; while I can justify this response in relation to some elements of the film, I cannot adequately explain it in terms of my



sympathies with what the movie has clearly and effectively tried to accomplish. If *The Year of Living Dangerously* works towards the neutralization of that which has evoked such strong emotion, how does it do this, how effectively, and what has it done to me, a viewer, by encouraging such a strong response but shifting the terms on which it has been elicited to others which would not have had the same impact?

One can elucidate the basic themes and structural confusion of *The Year of Living Dangerously*, wherein the film seems to be working at cross-purposes with itself, by referring to Freud's presentation of the elaborately circuitous processes through which the unconscious seeks to resist censorship in dreams.

In his chapter on "Affects in Dreams,"<sup>3</sup> Freud tells us that the affective (emotional) rather than the ideational (conceptual, thought-based) content of dreams is integral to our real mental experiences; that while the ideational material in dreams has undergone displacements and substitutions, the affects remain relatively unaltered. The affect is far less susceptible to the influence of censorship and hence it alone can point us towards "the idea which belongs to it but has been repressed and replaced by a substitute."<sup>4</sup>

Freud says of dreams that "If the affect and the idea are incompatible in their character and intensity, our waking judgment is at a loss."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, if a movie evokes a strong emotional response which seems oddly detached from that portended by its most obvious cinematic and narrative strategies, our analytic judgment is also at something of a loss. Clearly, if I am to carry through consistently with my analogy between dreams and this movie, I would look to the emotions evoked by the film to begin to unravel the ideas embedded in it.

Admittedly, I am using as a point of departure my own response, largely attributable to the strong identification I experienced with the Linda Hunt character. However, there has been some discernible consensus regarding the film's impact—it was a box office success, both in first run and on the repertory circuit, this success pre-dating Mel Gibson's relatively recent rise to fame. Leaving aside the evidence of random conversations and much that has been said about the film by reviewers, that this impact is largely attributable to the Linda Hunt character is borne out by the actress' having received the film's only Academy Award as Best Supporting Actress for her portrayal of Billy Kwan. My analysis of the film begins with the assumption that the Billy character evokes a strong emotional response for many viewers, and attempts to discover the reasons for this, and in terms of my analogy with dream logic, why such a response would be forced to find strategies of evading the censorship and what these strategies are.

Here I must acknowledge that I believe, along with many others, that Freud's theories provide an insightful and useful descriptive, rather than prescriptive basis for the potential reformation of ourselves and our society. Our utopian impulses, which transcend the constraints of the conditions under which we live, are discernible and still very much alive, although their expression is compromised, in the dreams we dream and possibly in the movies we respond to; beneath the more and less obvious ideological manipulations our emotions must undergo before being allowed to surface, our deeper yearnings often cry out, unheard. Thus I believe there is always much to be gained in the attempt to bridge the gap between affect and idea, both in the way of opening ourselves up to the voices of our real desires, and as a movement towards finding strategies for the true and unmanipulated

satisfaction of these desires.

My method of analysis immediately raises a number of obvious problems. If movies are to be compared to dreams, whose are they? The director's? The scriptwriter's? The spectator's? This question is perhaps unanswerable but I would like to make some general suggestions which would at least point towards the viability of my analysis of *The Year of Living Dangerously*.

It is a commonplace that movies resemble dreams on a level of mass experience in at least some obvious ways. This similarity arises partly from the confluence and interaction of such factors as the specific visual and sonic nature of the cinematic medium and the 'dream-like' conditions under which it is experienced; the invitation such a medium subsequently extends to unconscious expression in an atmosphere outside of the realm of everyday reality; and the dynamic by which elements of commercially successful films are continually recycled and simultaneously modified to accommodate social tensions relating to changing historical circumstances. (When movies are specifically inscribed with signifiers inviting the spectator to experience their unfolding as dream-like, the resemblance to dreams is often amplified, an effect I will later discuss with respect to *The Year of Living Dangerously*).

Mainstream films<sup>6</sup> are not, of course, products of a single unconscious in the way dreams are; however, just as the individual psyche is shaped largely by social and cultural forces, films may reflect these same social influences and psychic tensions, due perhaps to what C. Metz describes as a "correspondence between the libidinal economy" and the "political economy (the current cinema as a commercial enterprise)."<sup>7</sup> If a direct and specific comparison were possible between the factors determining the ultimate structural components of mainstream films and the psychic compulsions that cause dreams to be structured in the specific ways they are, it would likely reveal both analogous and diverging factors.

Under the relaxed conditions of dreaming, repressed unconscious impulses attempt to make their way into consciousness; however even in the dream state, the forces in the psyche that keep these impulses repressed are not entirely at rest. The primary condition of the dream-work, according to Freud, is that it "has above all to evade the censorship."<sup>8</sup> One could say that popular movies are often doing much the same thing, so that what would be censored from them is anything that would be disturbing enough either to keep large numbers of people from coming to see the movie in question or to arouse intensely 'anti-social' feelings. One typical strategy popular movies have for evading 'censorship' is so effectively to create a surface of mass acceptability that all or most traces of what must be repressed to create it are eradicated or co-opted, rendering censorship superfluous. Other films, intentionally or not, have structured into their unfolding the tension or dynamic of controversial and even unconscious or repressed elements, with narrative and cinematic conventions constraining (often just barely) the disturbing elements. Very few mainstream films present an unmitigatedly disturbing vision. One possible result of the attempt to patch over, with touchstone elements of familiarity and comfort, any rents in the presentation of an acceptable reality, as in the case of *The Year of Living Dangerously*, is the sacrifice of a film's narrative lucidity and thematic coherence.

I will endeavor in this analysis, by way of elaborating this analogy between dream structure and the structure of this film, to disentangle the conflicting discourses in *The Year of*



*Living Dangerously*, to determine what the actual and perhaps very potent ideas attached to the affects of this movie might be, and to discern whether this potency is burned up in the friction of the film's conflicts with itself.

## Development of the Dream Analogy

Fredric Jameson makes some interesting suggestions about what he terms the 'fantasy text,' also based on the tenets of Freud's dream theory, which point towards issues pertinent to my investigation of *The Year of Living Dangerously*. According to Jameson the fantasy text is structured on the basis of a 'phantasy' concealed within it:

[The fantasy text] knows a peculiar 'unconscious' reflexivity, as, in the process of generating itself, it must simultaneously secure its own ideological preconditions . . . the generation and adoption of ideological preconditions are still matters of what we may call the first level of the wish-fulfillment . . . It would seem a precondition for the indulgence of a specific daydream implies something like a reality principle or censorship within the latter.<sup>9</sup>

How successful, one might ask, would a mainstream movie about an impassioned, socially and politically aware, half-Chinese dwarf be? Likely, not very. However, embedded in what can be marketed as a hot romance between two full-grown and attractive caucasians of opposite sexes it might be gotten away with. The fantasy text which comprises *The Year of Living Dangerously* emanates from the Billy character; the ideological preconditions demanded by censorship within the reality principle are embodied in the romantic Guy Hamilton-Jill Bryant plot line, which represents the first level of wish-fulfillment, according to the Jameson terminology. For

. . . it is precisely the fantasy or wishfulfilling component of the . . . [text] which constitutes its most serious barrier to its reception by a public: [citing Freud] "You will remember how I have said that the daydreamer carefully conceals his phantasies from other people because he feels he has reasons to be ashamed of them."<sup>10</sup>

If this logic holds true for movies, the 'phantasy' Billy embodies is concealed beneath the normality represented by the relationship between Guy and Jill. However

It then sometimes happens that the objections are irrefutable, and that the wish-fulfilling imagination does its preparatory work so well that the wish, and desire itself, are confounded by the unanswerable resistance of the Real . . .<sup>13</sup>

And so the values embodied in the Billy character are superseded by those of the romance, even to the extent that Billy is killed off well before the movie ends.

Applying Jameson's suggestions about a text's production of a first level of wish-fulfillment, which enables the more disturbing deeper level of wish-fulfillment to break into consciousness without being censored, I posit that: (a) *The Year of Living Dangerously* does indeed establish itself as dream-like, as a kind of fantasy text; (b) Billy embodies the 'phantasy' at its basis, which must be either disavowed or neutralized; (c) the over-determination of power accruing to the signification of the Billy character is a device for rationalizing the distress caused by this surfacing into consciousness of the 'phantasy' he embodies, and for offsetting the positive significations the character is given; (d) the close connection between Billy and Guy serves to censor, by displacement (Guy narratively displaces Billy both as Jill's 'special friend' and as the central figure in the film), the qualities of the Billy 'phantasy' which are unacceptable on

the level of conscious awareness; it simultaneously works as a wish-fulfillment, which "consists in nothing else than a replacement of a disagreeable thing by its opposite"<sup>12</sup> (e) the relinquishing of the narrative trajectory to the relationship between Guy and Jill, which is narratively explained as a result of Billy's exercise of this over-determined power, is a capitulation to the need to reinstate the ideological preconditions that have allowed the 'phantasy' of Billy to emerge and to have such power in the first place; and (f) this latter simultaneously serves to neutralize the political issues raised by the film: Billy, as accepted 'Other,' signifies as link to the Indonesian 'Others'; as well, his attitudes and activities embody a recognition of the imperialist, racist attitudes that perpetuate their oppression. The capitulation of his centrality as a character undercuts the clarity of his political/humanistic concerns and retranslates them into a notion of human love, further tamed to the transcendent love possible within an idealized white Anglo-Saxon heterosexual relationship.

I will develop these six points in detail.

## (a) The Film as Dream Text

It might be objected at this point that the film, set as it is in an actual Third World situation at a specific historical moment, and with the ethics of journalism as one of its key thematic elements, is not intended to be read as dream-like, but rather as a very realistic evocation of particular events and characters played out in a life-like situation. This is indeed a level of the film's operations, but one to which it attends rather cursorily.

Aside from the notion that, as I've suggested, all films are to some extent dream-like, this particular film is heavily coded as depicting a situation that is very much like a dream, in most instances pointing towards Guy as a nexus of identification, through whose experiences and perceptions we partake of this exotic, hallucinatory and often distressing other world. For example, there is the recurrent use of images shot through the windshield of a car in which Guy is situated, either as passenger or driver: during Guy's initial taxi drive to the Hotel Indonesia; in the sequence in which Guy and Billy are covering the PKI demonstration at the US embassy; during Guy and Jill's drive to Billy's bungalow the first time they are alone together during the day, and later on in the film, in their dangerous drive through the roadblocks at night; in Guy's aborted visit to the 'cemetery' with the American reporter, Curtis/Michael Murphy; in the drive to the President's palace which results in Guy's injury; and finally during Guy and Kumar's drive to the airport. In each instance there are numerous shots through the windshield in which are seen soldiers, the poverty-stricken population, the young Indonesian prostitutes trying to sell their wares, pressing faces and bodies up against the glass. Frequently there is a sense of these bodies floating past—the effect of the movement of the car in which the camera is situated combining with that of the people stepping aside to let the car through, often glancing over their shoulders towards the car (i.e., the camera, i.e., the audience). In the daytime the heat waves in the bright sunlight further enhance the dream-like quality of the images we get of Jakartan street life, etc. from the point of view of Guy; night shots through windows here, as in so many other films, produce an hallucinatory, even at times nightmarish effect (cf. *Taxi Driver*, *The Conformist*).

The overall mingling of diegetic and extra-diegetic sounds and music contributes sonically to this atmosphere of unreality. The three basic musical motifs, one involving Gamelon gongs and bells, another synthesizer music, the



third orchestral, are often combined with such sounds as the creaking of bamboo, bird noises, children's voices, dripping or flowing water, etc. In Guy's actual dream sequence (which I will discuss in more detail later) many of these sounds, along with that of Billy's voice, are reprised.

At one point, as Guy plays back a recording of one of his news reports, we hear his voice: "I move as if in a dream through this agony which is famine . . ." Within the first five or so minutes of the film, several interrelated notions are implied: a dream-like quality which also is related to a beckoning towards a child-like consciousness; the relating of this quality of awareness to the presence or influence of Billy; and a definite but inexplicable connection between Billy and Guy. Beneath the unfamiliar and eerie shadow images of the Wayang puppet theatre in the opening credits we hear the sound of children's voices murmuring and laughing along with the Javanese Gamelon music. Before we are introduced visually to Guy, we see Billy, small and somewhat strange-looking, at his typewriter, and hear Billy's voice identify Guy by name and birthdate. We then see Guy, first trying to find his bearings in the chaos and hallucinatory glare of the airport interior; next thrust into the visual busy-ness of milling crowds of Indonesians, political placards and banners, etc., the night's darkness almost undetectable through the unnatural glare which bathes the scene; and finally being driven through the streets to his hotel, during which there are a number of the aforementioned through-the-windshield shots. There is then a cut from a close-up of Guy in the taxi to a mirror close-up of Billy, his location unestablished, and then a medium shot of Guy facing right and a return to the close-up of Billy, who we now realize is in a bar (which we come to know as the Wayang, where the foreign journalists socialize), looking over at Guy. In the bar, Billy is the only one of the journalists to realize who Guy is, and Wally, a British journalist (Noel Ferrier), bemusedly remarks: "Now how did our diminutive friend know that?", as Billy approaches Guy, introduces himself, and takes Guy in hand, introducing him to the other journalists seated at the bar. Moments later Guy leaves the bar with Billy trailing behind him. As they walk, Billy crosses in front of Guy and seems almost to lead him on into the bustling streets. The soundtrack is one of the bells and gongs of the Gamelon, again intermingled with children's voices (there are also a number of shots of children, often watching Guy), other more specifically diegetic Indonesian adult voices gradually emerging. As Billy and Guy begin their walk through the night-lit Jakarta streets, we hear Billy, in voiceover, saying

Most of us become children again when we enter the slums of Asia. That night I watched you walk back into childhood, the oldest opposite intensities, laughter and misery, the crazy and the grim, Toytown and a city of fear.

On one level the film is clearly signifying Guy's regression to a child-like state; the expression on his face through much of the film suggests that he is dazed and disoriented (this is less consistently the case when he begins to be involved with Jill). Whether or not the individual audience member feels a strong identification with the Guy character, our education into the language of popular cinematic conventions has taught us that by allowing ourselves, at least partially or temporarily, such an identification, we can gain access to what the film is about. However what is demanded of us as spectators in this film is not entirely clear: while, to some extent, we share Guy's bewilderment because he is, via the familiarity of his 'type,' an obvious focal point for audience identification, we are often directly subjected to the halluci-

natory impact of sounds and images which are not mediated by Guy's presence on screen.

Equally confusing to identification codes is the prominence given the Billy character. We are introduced to Billy before we see Guy. He is given the voice-over narration which suggests, within popular cinema conventions, that we should be identifying with him. However, our responses to him remain unsettled, the significations continually shifting. We're not sure whether we're supposed to trust him or not, whether Billy's role is or is not limited to that of the catalyst to a dream we are having through Guy's eyes. The access we are given to Billy as a thinking and feeling individual (although again, often with Guy onscreen to mediate, with the notable exceptions of Billy's visits to his adopted Indonesian family) serves enormously to humanize him for the viewer, and also offsets our inclination to distrust him. Billy's emergence as a character in his own right disturbs the ease with which we can share Guy's dream. It separates us from Guy. We share Guy's dream, but also watch him dreaming in a movie which is like our own dream, and in which Billy plays an equally prominent role.

In his book *Freaks*, Leslie Fiedler says:

Reading [the] Oz books, for instance, or . . . *Peter Pan*, or *Alice in Wonderland*, or *Gulliver's Travels* we cross in our imaginations a borderline which in childhood we could never be sure was there, entering a realm where precisely what qualifies us as normal on the one side identifies us as Freaks on the other. And after returning, we may experience for a little while the child's constant confusion about what really is freakish, what normal, on either side. For children, the primary source of such confusion is scale . . .<sup>13</sup>

In *The Year of Living Dangerously* the spectator is brought into this state of confusion through a number of effects: 1) our identification with Guy, and hence with the regression in consciousness he is undergoing; 2) our simultaneous identification with Billy, who is a dwarf; 3) our visual confrontation with the disparity in size between the two characters given prominence in the film, forcing us to cross in our imaginations that borderline which according to Fiedler was such a source of confusion to us as children; 4) our witnessing of the inexplicably close connection signified between these two characters (with all of these effects interacting and generally augmented by the always potentially dream-like conditions of the medium).

## (b) Billy as 'Phantasy'

It is difficult to be entirely specific about the threat embodied by the sight of the 'Other' in the particular form of a dwarf. According to Fiedler:

Only the true Freak challenges the conventional boundaries between male and female, sexed and sexless, animal and human, large and small, self and other, and consequently between reality and illusion, experience and fantasy, fact and myth.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps it is in the conjunction between similarity and difference that the dwarf embodies each individual's fear that he or she might also become different, marked for ostracization. The dwarf is a person who, as Billy tells Guy in the course of the film (and if the person is male) is "a normal man, of normal intelligence, capable of having normal children, but whose body is a joke." No longer a child, "normal" in all respects, the adult dwarf is never assimilable into normality. In reminding us, by his or her child-like stature, of what it was like to be a child, the dwarf is reminding us of a



freedom we experienced before we were socialized into normal and acceptable societal roles, a freedom which it became increasingly more frightening to acknowledge, which it became more and more necessary to compromise and finally to disavow as we gradually grew into our adult awareness of our social roles. But the dwarf-as-adult simultaneously frightens us, suggesting to us on some level of consciousness that our presocialized perversity is still present in us as adults—perhaps our defences will collapse and we too will reveal that we are not truly “normal.” According to Fiedler:

... each sex tends to feel itself forever defined as freakish in relation to the other. And from our uneasiness at this . . . arises the dream of androgyny.<sup>15</sup>

Billy is, of course, male but he is effectively (narratively) neuter by virtue of his supposed physical incompatibility with ‘normal’ people. This is further complicated by the fact that Billy is played by a woman. The extent to which an audience would be aware of this prior to viewing the film is of course difficult to ascertain, and whether or not Billy’s ‘transsexuality’ is an essential ingredient in the film’s structure and impact irrespective of audience awareness on this count is a matter equally hard to determine. (That it was possible for a female dwarf to effectively play the part of a male dwarf in itself suggests a more immediate degree of gender interchangeability than is possible for ‘normals’). Through the course of the film there is at least one sequence in which it seems possible that the director might, for one reason or another, have consciously wished to reveal that the male character is played by a female. Billy has successfully encouraged a romantic liaison between Jill and Guy which is about to be consummated in Billy’s home (Billy has told Guy that he will be away for a few days during which time he has offered Guy use of the bungalow). Guy and Jill have made a getaway from an Embassy gathering, defying both public opinion and the government’s curfew, and driven with reckless romantic abandon to Billy’s. We cut from the couple in the car to an extreme close-up of a bullet hole, hardly recognizable as such, in the car. Long, feminine fingers enter the frame, move slowly across to the bullet hole and begin delicately to caress it. We then cut to a medium close up of someone’s torso moving beside the car, which is riddled with bullet holes incurred during the drive through the roadblocks. We recognize this as Billy by the Hawaiian shirt, which he wears throughout the film. The figure’s womanly breasts are quite discernible as the camera tracks along the car with the body. The camera then moves up to include Billy’s head and continues past him to include his bungalow. We then cut to a close up of Billy’s face in three quarters profile, breathless and with an almost grim expression; he looks down and then up again; now there is a sad smile on his face (this scene is perhaps an oblique reference to a passage from the novel on which the film is based, in which there is a description of one of Billy’s identification figures, “Dwarf Semar, the god in mis-shapen form, whose breasts are female, sitting in tears”).<sup>16</sup> He then looks up at the sky, the sad smile still on his face, and subsequently walks out of frame. Billy obviously has not left town; rather he is outside his home, witnessing his success at bringing his two ‘special friends’ together.

What one sees in these shots, whether or not they are actually meant to reveal that Billy is played by a woman, undoubtedly adds to the aura of gender ambiguity surrounding the character; one’s sense of this ambiguity would certainly be augmented by a prior knowledge of this fact but would not be dependent on it. This particular sequence clearly illustrates, in either case, that while Billy well may orchestrate such events

as are now taking place in his bungalow, he cannot partake of them. His status as outsider clearly excludes him from the relationship between the idealized normal couple.

In an essay entitled “7 Notes for the Reconstruction of Sexuality,” Muriel Dinen says:

Disavowed by the domestic origins of intimacy and shunned by the public places of work and power, [sexuality] becomes alienated from the body/psyche in which it arose. Its fearsome strangeness, a result of childhood amnesia, informs sexual orientation, gender identity, and sexual ideology . . . In other words, the learning of sexual repression is also the learning of one’s place in gender stratification, as well as the learning of the reification of self, other, passion. The gulfs between male and female, child and adult, work and play, self and other, domesticate ‘passion’ by calling it love, harnessing love to monogamous heterosexual marriage, and embedding marriage in the nuclear family.<sup>17</sup>

Billy’s existence may be a causal intervention in the ‘passionate’ relationship but never an active ingredient; in fact his existence is ultimately justified solely by his ability to intervene in the construction of normality such a relationship entails, and the destruction of that which is outside of it, in this case, his own life (and, along with it, any disturbing awareness of the specific Third World situation in which these events take place, an aspect of the film which I will be taking up later).

As a character, Billy represents a disturbing conjunction of various threads—a humane, intelligent, compassionate, integrity-bound, principled man but one who is deprived of the “normal” social codes of behavior by ‘a fluke of nature’—his abnormal physiology; a bridge between the first and the third worlds (he is half Australian and half Chinese) whose existence inextricably and undeniably links these two cultures within the community of humanity; a journalist with a conscience, a cameraman who puts the well-being of those he photographs above the assumed priority of the value of information, an assumption which is the cornerstone of supposed journalistic prowess, and who acknowledges the political responsibility of all of his actions, within and outside of his profession; and finally as well as consummately, a man who is not a man in any traditional sense, because he is a dwarf, and prior to this, a male dwarf played by a female actress, the very definition of the transgressor of norms. What makes the character so threatening and potentially distressing is that while indeed every element which defines him defines him as the ‘Other,’ the one with whom we must not identify, the one who is by definition our enemy, the movie simultaneously allows Billy a hero’s status, as well as wisdom and compassion beyond that of any of the other characters. He is simultaneously much that we aspire to be and everything we fear becoming.

Juliet Mitchell, in elaborating on Freudian terminology, describes a symptom as:

an alternative representation of a forbidden wish which has broken through from the unconscious, whence it was banished, into consciousness—but in an ‘unrecognizable’ form. Condensed into the symptom are all the energies of the sexual drive and those that were used originally to repress it: it is both the thoughts attached to the drive and its denial.<sup>18</sup>

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OPPOSITE—Guy and his ‘eyes.’







This, I would argue, fairly accurately describes the role that the representation of Billy plays in the film, and explains the need for the neutralization of this 'phantasy'—this full-fledged image of pre-socialized, non-sexist, non-racist *passion* that Billy represents.

### (c) The Overdetermination of Billy's Power

The concept of Otherness can be theorized in many ways and on many levels. Its psychoanalytic significance resides in the fact that it functions not simply as something external to the culture or self, but also as what is repressed (but never destroyed) in the self and projected outwards in order to be hated and disowned.<sup>19</sup>

The film begins with Billy. The credit sequence consists of the shadow imagery of the Wayang, with which he is to be so closely associated, accompanied by traditional Javanese Gamelon music and children's voices. This configuration of sound and image is mysterious and inscrutable to the uninitiated Western audience—its strangeness is the movie's first signification and atmospheric layer. The voices fade and the music carries over into the first shot of the film which is of a dwelling in a lush and tropical setting, night-lit, which we will come to recognize as Billy's bungalow; then there is a shot of Billy himself, seated at his typewriter. During this shot, Billy, in voice-over, begins a narration that continues intermittently, although it becomes increasingly less frequent, until his death. (Incidentally, the gender of this voice is unusually indeterminate). We assume that the narrating voice (which we expect, from experience, will help us understand the events about to take place) belongs to the dwarf whom we see as we hear it (and whose gender is also visually somewhat obscure). The voice can at once be identified as that of an outsider, i.e., of one physically marked as outside of societal norms. He is also perhaps a figure of some power in that we might well become dependent on the information his voice provides. That he is at a typewriter extends the potential limits of his power by suggesting he may also have some authorial power, albeit as a character, in determining the nature of the events about to unfold. (Re-viewing the film, knowing that Billy dies during its course, the effect of Billy's voice is disconcerting, signifying, if anything, his power to return from the dead and to reinhabit events, comparable in some ways to the opening of Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*.) The unease we may feel by virtue of Billy's outsider status (if he is not 'one of us,' he could be a threat to us), is compounded by the fact that he has been given the potentially authoritative control which is vested in the narrative voice. The groundwork is already laid, in these first several shots, for the spectator to be, at least unconsciously, wondering: is this a creature to be feared? Will he wield his power kindly or cruelly?

This undertone of Billy's power becomes an actual motif in the film in the recurrent references to the Wayang shadow puppet theatre and to Billy's intimate connection to this tradition, the suggestion being that this connection exists largely because he is a dwarf, and that through it he exerts some kind of influence over the lives of others. The connection extends through his keeping of files on various individuals and to his power as a photographer (in Hamilton's file, for instance, there is both a cut-out photograph of Hamilton and a cut-out image of one of the Wayang puppet figures, Prince Arjuna). The opening sequence has already connected Billy with the Wayang, the strangeness of its shadow puppet imagery being immediately followed by the strangeness of the image of a dwarf. Billy's voice, when we first hear

it, is reciting from his file on Hamilton. We cut from Billy to a series of shots depicting Hamilton's arrival in Jakarta (the Indonesian capital). Billy appears again in the bar at the hotel to greet Hamilton and to take him under his wing. After guiding Hamilton on his unsettling walk through the streets, he tells him he will fail to get an interview the following day at a press conference because he has no contacts. We then see Billy at his typewriter, working on his file of Hamilton, the content of which we hear in voiceover. Next we see Guy failing miserably at the aforementioned news conference, and returning to his office. The camera holds its position in the stairwell, so that we continue to see the backlit frosted glass window outside the office as Hamilton enters and closes the door behind him. Through the glass we see a dark image, remarkably similar to the Wayang shadow imagery which opened the film, of Hamilton removing his jacket and hanging it up. The sequence is accompanied by an eerie version of the Gamelon music, the sound of water dripping from the air conditioner and then the squeaking of the door as a shadow crosses the venetian blinds. Billy then enters, startling Hamilton. In the conversation following, Billy offers to arrange an on-film interview with the head of the PKI, which will be of enormous benefit to Hamilton's career, and they agree to form a partnership. Throughout the entirety of this conversation, Billy is seated cross-legged on a desk, so that we are continually cross-cutting from low-angle shots of Billy from Hamilton's point of view to shots down on Guy from Billy's vantage point. As Billy makes his offer, these shots become increasingly tight, culminating in an extreme close-up, from the same slightly low-angle, as Billy says, "You want it . . . it's yours." This scene has obviously been shot in a manner that confers visual power on Billy, along with the practical power he has in his ability to obtain an interview for Guy. The sequence ends with a close-up of Guy asking, "Why the break to me? Why not Potter? [his predecessor]," a medium shot of Billy, with a stern expression on his face, answering, "I didn't like him," as Billy hops off the desk, the camera following him, his face half in darkness, saying, "We'll make a great team, old man," and the camera dolly into Billy's face, intense and solemn, "you for the words, me for the pictures. I can be your eyes."

At this point in the film Billy is already (1) connected with the Wayang; (2) shown to be almost omnipresent and possibly omniscient (so far in the course of the film we have either seen him onscreen, heard his voice or seen his predictions coming true); (3) shown to have some interest in Hamilton's destiny; and (4) shown to have some actual power, perhaps supernatural, to affect that destiny.

In the movie there are many extractions from and allusions to passages in the novel on which the film is based (with the same title and whose author, J.C. Koch, is credited as one of the screenwriters) pertaining to the history and mythology of dwarves and to the beliefs underlying the Wayang puppet theatre. Although not nearly as intricately drawn as in the novel, the references in the film suffice to create a suggestion of the interfusion of these mythologies. In the film Billy explains the characters of the Wayang to Hamilton. One of the characters he describes is "King Kresna: . . . he's obviously Krishna, who's one of the incarnations of the Hindu god Vishnu. Vishnu comes to earth as many things: as Krishna, who acts as a charioteer to the hero Arjuna—and also as a dwarf, in Hindu myth." In the novel he also speaks of Semar, who "is a dwarf who serves Arjuna. But he's also a god in disguise—the old Javanese god Ismaja . . . My patron . . . The patron of all dwarfs,"<sup>20</sup> who has been



"transformed into a dwarf and a clown" and who could "still rule the world if he wanted."<sup>21</sup> Thus Billy identifies himself with a god, who in dwarf guise, serves Arjuna, with whom he identifies Hamilton (this is clear from the image of Arjuna in his file on Hamilton). The intricate string of connections continues. The 'dalang'—the puppet master—"is God," and President Sukarno, with whom Billy also identifies (there is a photograph of Billy dressed up as Sukarno on the wall in Billy's bungalow; at one point in the film Billy dons a cap that is imitative of one Sukarno always wears publicly) is described by Billy as "the great puppet master."

Billy clearly sees himself as exerting control over the lives of others akin to that of a god, or alternatively, of someone in political power. At one point we see Billy at his typewriter and hear him, in voiceover, saying, "Here on the quiet page I'm master, just as I'm master in the darkroom . . . And here, among my files, I can shuffle like cards the lives I deal with. Their faces stare out at me . . . people who will become other people: people who will become old, betray their dreams, become ghosts." (Again, upon re-viewing, this passage takes on a certain ghostly irony.) Shortly before his death, in his confrontation with Guy, he says, "Don't you understand? You've lost Jill . . . I gave her to you, now I'm taking her back . . . I believed in you. I thought you were a man of light. That's why I gave you those stories you think are so important . . . I made you see things . . . I created you."

In the Swedish novel *The Dwarf* by Pär Lagerkvist, the title character, at first deemed insignificant by the prince at whose court he serves, ultimately comes to be seen as the purveyor of the evil power governing the choices and events in the kingdom which lead to disaster. More specifically he becomes the embodiment of the potential for evil and all that is antagonistic to love in all of the others. In *The Year of Living Dangerously*, Billy is of course rendered quite differently, but what he has in common with the title character of *The Dwarf* is an extraordinary power over the lives with which he comes in contact. However, Billy's actual power, as a character, to affect the lives of other characters clearly comes not from dwarfness *per se* but rather from his cunning on the one hand and his capacity to love and become involved with his fellow human beings on the other. In fact, the extraordinary power ambiguously attributed to him confuses this point: it marks him more clearly as outside of normal social relations and undercuts his effectiveness as an individual human being.

Billy's power is clearly over-determined, so much so that the tone of the character is completely ambiguous. While on the one hand he is shown to be sensitive, compassionate, intelligent, talented and proficient, the extraordinary powers simultaneously attributed to him invest him with an undercurrent of malevolence. Why would a film go to such pains to create a positive and even inspirational character and yet undermine its own efforts? Why bother developing such a fascinating and engaging character, in the figure of a dwarf, only to supplant it with a much less interesting male protagonist, extraordinary only in his ordinariness as a male hero and not drawn in nearly so much detail (this would be unnecessary, as the type Guy is signified as representing is immediately recognizable and almost totally self-explanatory—even the name contributes to the sense of the already given 'regular Guy')?

#### (d) Billy/Guy

Whenever one psychical element is linked with another

by an objectionable or superficial association there is also a legitimate and deeper link between them which is subjected to the resistance of the censorship.<sup>22</sup>

I have already shown how the first several sequences of the film establish a close and inexplicable connection between Billy and Guy, primarily by way of Billy's unexplained know- ingness about Guy even before they have met, and in the way the two are visually linked through the cross-cutting of almost symmetrical close-ups in different locations, a device which recurs frequently in film. There are also a number of specific privileged instances which link the two characters. In the sequence in which Billy has brought Guy to his bungalow, Guy is shown standing in front of a photograph of a dwarf with whom Billy has just identified himself ("a normal man, of normal intelligence, capable of having normal children, but whose body is a joke"). Billy leaves the frame, Guy stands alone, the photo on the wall visible over his right shoulder, a sort of stunned expression on his face. He then turns his head in such a way that it is superimposed over the head of the dwarf in the photo, and the image is held for several seconds before cutting away. During Billy's death sequence we cut from a shot of Guy running to a shot of Billy's body falling through the air during which we hear a scream, obviously Billy's. The scream continues into the following medium shot of Guy running with his mouth open so that the scream almost appears to be coming from him. There is also the reverberation of Billy's "I can be your eyes" when Guy is in danger of actually losing his eyesight (the narrative implication of course being that through his association with Billy, Guy has learned to see beyond his own complacency; the extent to which this has been realized remains questionable). At one point Billy tells Guy that people have remarked on the similarity of their green eyes; he also suggests, in voiceover, as he cuts out a picture of Guy for his file, that he and Guy "have something in common. We're divided men, your father American, mine Chinese. We're not quite at home in the world."

What seems on the surface to be an absurd identification between the qualities of the male protagonist, Guy Hamilton (tall, strong, masculine), and those of Billy is perhaps not so absurd at all. In fact the film has gone some distance in asserting that there is something to this association between them. At one point Curtis (the American journalist) refers to Guy and Billy derisively as "Sir Guy and the Black Dwarf." (It is worth noting that in their scenes together, Guy is generally well lit while Billy's face is in varying degrees of shadow; in fact, rarely, if ever, is Billy's face fully lit.) "In unconscious thinking itself every train of thought is yoked with its contrary opposite . . .," Freud says.<sup>23</sup>

This turning of a thing into its opposite is made possible by the intimate associative chain which links the idea of a thing with its opposite in our thoughts. Like any other kind of displacement it can serve the ends of the censorship; but it is also frequently a product of wish-fulfilment, for wish-fulfilment consists in nothing else than a replacement of a disagreeable thing by its opposite.<sup>24</sup>

If Billy embodies our deeper wish to be able to fulfill our desires beyond the intervention of the constraining forces of culture/society/superego/conscience/reality principle, the possibility of fulfilling this wish, as it is allowed to surface in the positive aspects of the character, must be displaced, because in the very movement towards consciousness the anxieties around the immediate societal dangers of entertaining such a fantasy outweigh the potential pleasure of allowing it to become reality. And so Billy is not only trans-





Guy in pursuit of a story.

formed into that which is opposite to him, but is put to the service of creating the conditions that enable this transformation. This latter manufactures a narrative rationalization for the existence of the character who embodies the deeper wish fulfillment that must remain concealed beneath what Jameson has termed the first level of wish fulfillment. This first level of wish fulfillment entails the creation of the ideological preconditions which embody the very opposite of the 'phantasy' which must remain concealed within it. Without the presence of a Guy character, a character such as Billy would likely never have been allowed to come to exist in mainstream cinema.

### (3) Oedipal Trajectory

In the West we want answers for everything: everything is right or wrong or good or bad. In the Wayang no such final conclusions exist.

The Guy character is a gear in a larger mechanism, the Oedipal narrative, the powerful given-ness of which obscures the unpredictable, free-floating story of Billy, forcing the latter into its service and then into self-immolation. The following are, briefly, the phases wherein Billy's story is subsumed into a normative boy meets/loses/gets girl nar-

rative.

- (1) Billy introduces Guy to the Wayang figures: Prince Arjuna ("he's a hero, but he can also be fickle and selfish"—as we cut to a close-up of Guy); Princess Srikanda ("noble and proud, headstrong. Arjuna will fall in love with her"—the latter spoken as Guy enters the frame) and the Dwarf, Semar ("He serves the Prince"—and we cut to a close-up of a photograph of Jill). Throughout this sequence, Guy's face is fully lit, while Billy's is predominantly in shadow.
- (2) Billy introduces Guy to Jill and the Colonel. Guy covers for the Colonel's rudeness to the Indonesian waiter ("a gin and tonic does *not* have ice"), and inadvertently insults him, ("Some joker kept playing the bagpipes"), after which Jill rubs her foot against the Colonel's. The Colonel challenges Guy to a race ("You Australians are supposed to be able to swim, aren't you?" Jill: "When Ralph says race, he means it"); Guy allows the Colonel to win ("He had you worried, didn't he?" "Indeed he did"). Billy and Jill both smile down warmly at Guy.
- (3) Billy defends "Jilly" against Guy's accusations of a British attitude of superiority. He also tells Guy that he has once proposed marriage to Jill but she refused. Guy asks, "What about the Colonel?" Billy responds that "She's fond of him." In the same scene Billy tells Guy that they make a good team, and that they even look alike. (It is difficult to



ascertain whether Billy is trying to replace himself with Guy, in order to have Jill, or with Jill [Billy/Jilly] in order to have Guy. Presumably either or both.)

(4) At Wally's party, Billy ignores the Colonel's announcement of "Curfew time!" to bring Jill and Guy together. The Colonel insults Guy on the basis of his work ("You're still young enough and brave enough to speculate"). Jill takes the Colonel's part. Close-ups of Billy link alternating close-ups of Guy and Jill. We cut to a photo of Jill in Billy's bungalow, and then to a close-up of Billy as he says, "So it begins" with what seems a sad, but determined, expression on his face.

(5) Billy fails to meet Jill at Guy's office. Guy and Jill go off, supposedly in search of Billy, and spend the afternoon together. As they approach Billy's, Jill asks Guy why he let Ralph win the swimming race. He answers: "It seemed important to him. I guess he reminded me of my father. He had the same bald head, mustache. He was killed in the war." Jill tells Guy that he is everything Billy would like to be. They discuss Billy's relationship with Ibu (Guy asks incredulously, "Not his kid, is it?"—"No, he gives them food and money, that's all."). The two are caught in the rain together. Guy parodies the Colonel ("Green stuff usually has ice, doesn't it? Waiter, get me another one."). They both laugh. We see Billy in his darkroom developing a photograph of the two of them together that afternoon.

(6) Jill's flat-mate answers the phone to Guy's call; beside her there is a lamp in the shape of a black dwarf, which fills almost half the screen. Jill will not accept Guy's call. We see a close-up of Jill facing right, pensive, smoking. cut to a close-up of Guy, facing left, looking pensive, smoking. We hear Billy's voice, discover Guy is at Billy's as the camera tracks across the wall, moving past a photo of Jill, then one of an Indonesian peasant, then another photo of Jill. Billy offers Guy the use of his bungalow.

(7) Billy and Jill have lunch together. Jill asks, "What are you grinning at, you sly fox?" Next sequence, Billy gives Guy an invitation to a reception at the British Embassy. "Jill will be there," he tells him.

(8) Guy spirits Jill away from the reception, leaving the Colonel, wearing kilt and carrying bagpipes, shouting, "Jill, what the hell are you doing? The curfew!" The two drive off to Billy's; Billy lurks outside.

From this point on, Billy is shown to have less and less power to influence either of them. Billy and Jill are not seen together again. Billy has three more scenes with Guy: one in which he expresses his anger at Guy's use of the information Jill has given him; another nightmarish sequence in which they confront one another in an alleyway and Guy calls Billy a "mad little bastard," and a third in which Billy lies dying on the pavement. During this portion of the film, Guy goes off to the 'cemetery'—the part of the city where the young Indonesian prostitutes work—with Curtis; he also goes out to the Javanese countryside with Kumar, and has a nightmare in which his female office assistant, Tiger Lily, dressed in a black bathing suit, tries to drown him in the swimming pool into which she has dove just prior to his going to sleep. However, after Billy's death, Guy rejects "bad desire" and pledges his loyalty to Jill, when they meet unexpectedly at Billy's: "God, I loved him." "When are you leaving?" "Tomorrow at two." "The last thing I wanted to do was hurt you by writing that story. I wanted to talk to you. I didn't want to lose you. Jill, I'll be on that plane." Guy does have one last misadventure which almost prevents him from getting to the plane in time, but everything seems to work in his favor after that and despite

the aftermath of the failed revolution (roadblocks, roadside executions, general chaos) he makes it to the plane in the nick of time (they actually have to roll the stairway back for him to ascend). Jill is waiting to embrace him in the plane's doorway.

In his analysis of Fassbinder's *In A Year of Thirteen Moons*, Robert Bourgoyne says:

The principal protagonist . . . is a transsexual, someone who has crossed an absolute border, transgressed the fundamental divide of gender upon which, according to psychoanalytic theory, all society—the systems which compose it, including language itself—is based . . . *Thirteen Moons* exhibits a balanced, stubbornly rectilinear form apparently indifferent to the transgression which, by an ordinary logic, should constitute the collapse of its classical symmetry.<sup>25</sup>

He then goes on to examine "some of the strategies by which, like the secondary revision of the dream test, the film binds the threatening and potentially disruptive sexuality to a plot all too familiar, a scenario all too recurrent." Bourgoyne might almost have been making these comments with respect to *The Year of Living Dangerously*. Billy's centrality is unceremoniously abandoned when the character dies, at which point the film attains to a reconstitution of "its classical symmetry." The unassimilable 'Other-ness' of Billy is awkwardly subsumed into a readily recognizable Hollywood-type narrative format (this awkwardness is apparent in the forced irregularity of the two Oedipal-type situations: in one, Guy and Jill are parental figures and Billy is an 'abnormal' child in that he is simultaneously in love with both of them; the resolution is Billy's death; the other, with the Colonel as father figure and Jill as daughter/lover is resolved when Guy, as son, actually replaces the Colonel as Jill's lover/husband/protector). Both Billy and Elvira, the transsexual protagonist in the Fassbinder film, commit suicide. The Fassbinder film thus plays itself out within the "classical symmetry" demanded by the Oedipal trajectory essentially as a tragedy, in which the character's fatal flaw, his transsexuality, dooms him. If the question to which he is seeking an answer is "How can such an individual as myself exist in society?" the solution he discovers is that he can't, and this provides the narrative logic for Elvira's suicide. *The Year of Living Dangerously* resolves the difficulty of its 'transsexual' central character somewhat differently, with none of the classical grace of tragedy. Billy is also asking how to exist, specifically with regard to his social/political concerns ("What then must we do?" he continually asks himself), and by implication, with regard to his own desires. His effort to create the Guy/Jill relationship seems to be a rather desperate attempt, in the face of the obvious answer to his question—that he can't exist happily as a dwarf, and that he can't do anything to alleviate the oppression and starvation that runs rampant throughout the world—to evade the answer to this question. It amounts to a substitution of what is possible for what is not, which also describes what the narrative does. What would have been Billy's tragedy is thus transformed into what Frye would describe as a quest romance which,

translated into dream terms . . . is the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfillment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality . . . translated into ritual terms, the quest-romance is the victory of fertility over the wasteland. Fertility means food and drink, bread and wine, body and blood, the union of male and female.<sup>26</sup>



In dream terms, the reality that Billy embodies is still present, but the anxieties that surround him are alleviated by the conversion/displacement of his reality into the fond memory of the one who made all this present happiness possible. Within the terms of patriarchal ritual, as long as Billy lives, the wasteland will prevail over fertility.

Leslie Fiedler says:

What children's books tell us, finally, is that maturity involves the ability to believe the self normal, only the other a monster or Freak. Failing to attain such security, we are likely to end by not growing up at all, like Lemuel Gulliver, whom we leave at his story's end in a stall with beasts—his sole refuge from adulthood, home, and the family.<sup>27</sup>

The Oedipal trajectory is the path to 'maturity.' If we are to emerge from the experience of the film as fully constituted 'adults,' we must leave the theatre with the sense that our heart has been with the Guy/Jill romance all along, that its fruition has been gratifying, and that Billy existed solely to help make possible this gratification. If we do not accept our emotions within such a framework, all we are is confused, and confusion is not 'mature.' According to Jameson:

... one of the most persistent functions of art has been, not to sharpen contradiction or to force a painful self-consciousness about irresolvable conflicts, but rather very precisely to evolve "imaginary resolutions of real contradictions," to use Lévi-Strauss' apt formula: non-conceptual "resolutions" in which the narrative logic itself—like the rebus or dream—rotates swiftly enough to generate an after-image of appeasement, of harmony, and of conflictual reconciliation.<sup>29</sup>

This seems to have been the narrative ploy of *The Year of Living Dangerously*. The Oedipal resolution need not make any conceptual sense, for it carries with it a long tradition of the image of "appeasement"—the image that has for time immemorial been enforced upon our social, adult, sense of ourselves.

## (f) Politics of the Dream/Film

There is much in *The Year of Living Dangerously* that, within the context of mainstream film, is difficult to fault in its ostensible intentions: to draw attention to gross inequalities of living standards and to the attitudes that perpetuate such situations throughout the world. However, the political discourse of the film is quite diffuse and vague even prior to the compromises imposed on this discourse by the film's self-censoring strategies. This vagueness, coupled with the compulsion to withdraw credibility from the Billy character, who is constructed as the focal point for the most solid, immediate relationship the viewer can have with the political issues the film raises, makes the question of the film's political impact one of its more problematic aspects.

Many of the inconsistencies of the film's political project are immediately apparent in the movie's divergences from the novel on which it is based. Some of the key alterations are as follows:

(1) With a fairly disengaged character named "Cookie" as narrator in the novel, and Billy as a character whose files have come into Cookie's hands, our perspective on the narrative events and attitudes towards them is less strained and confused than in the film, particularly by the inconsistency of the presentation of Billy's character with his intermittent voiceovers. We are given concrete political and historical background in the novel which is not provided in the film,

albeit possibly owing to the greater ease with which such information can be imparted in a novel. In the film, if one is not familiar with the political situation in Indonesia in 1965, one has a hard time knowing quite what is happening, and the situation is subsequently generalized into "Third World political chaos." The novel's action involving the fictional characters is made contingent on the actual historic events rather than being superimposed over them as it is in the movie, and we are given a much more specific and detailed portrayal of these events.

(2) Kumar is much more fully drawn in the novel, and becomes an extremely eloquent spokesperson for his people.

(3) The relationship between Guy and Jill is not given nearly as much narrative centrality in the novel, is far less idealized, and again it is generally determined by events larger than the characters themselves. The reader knows, from the information given in the novel, that "The Year of Living Dangerously" is the political theme Sukarno has decided upon for his country in 1965. To the extent that the characters are 'living dangerously,' it is because they are affected by events resulting from Sukarno's policy. The film's title is never explained and we are left to assume, after the sequence in which Guy and Jill take the dangerous drive through the curfew barriers under machine gun fire in order to make love in Billy's bungalow, that this is what 'living dangerously' entails—pursuing an intense and serious love affair despite the dangers posed by an exotic, politically turbulent environment.

(4) The treatment of Wally's homosexuality in the novel is more detailed and very sympathetic—he is characterized as having a genuine respect for and devotion to the young Indonesian men with whom he is involved.

(5) The film sequence in which Tiger Lily dives into the pool and then attempts to drown Guy in his dream seems to be an attempt to make use of what in the novel is a fairly complex subplot involving a female Russian spy, and which is integrated into the specific political convolutions of the historical situation. In the film, the sequence is simultaneously sexist, racist and from a narrative perspective, totally gratuitous. As I have earlier suggested, it functions obliquely as a phase in Guy's movement through the Oedipal situation, with Tiger Lily playing the combined role of woman as vamp, i.e. castrating female, and exotic, threatening 'Other' (Indonesian, and therefore dark-complexioned, wearing a black bathing suit, threateningly sensual, and to complete the picture, a Communist). (One can only assume that, whatever the conscious intentions in this transformation, in the script adaptation and filming processes, this material was reformed in the interests of repressing a positive image of 'Otherness' and reinstating 'normality'.)

All of this is not to say that the film entirely compromises its political content. Much footage is given to depicting the degraded living conditions of the poor Indonesians. Some of this footage falls into the category of the pseudo-documentary (the impact of which opens onto a whole area of debate which I do not have the space to enlarge upon here), some into the hallucinatory. However, much of this footage is shot from Billy's point of view, which is not only emotionally empathetic (to the extent that we identify with his humanism), but which also is chiefly shot from a lower angle, which tends to dominate its subjects less and to implicate the viewer more intimately into the situation of these people (Billy's visits to the river community are shot chiefly in this manner.)

The Westerners are critically portrayed as almost unremittently callous and insensitive to the plight of those around





Billy visits his 'adopted' family.

them. For example, after one of Billy's visits to Ibu, we hear Billy's voice saying:

Her tragedy is repeated a million times in this city. What then must we do? We must give love to whomever God has placed in our path.

During the above, we cut to an image of Indonesian faces peering through a circular window into the Wayang bar and hear laughter and raucous voices; we cut to a close-up of money being swept off a bar counter and then to a shot of the journalists, with Wally joyously declaring, "I have just secured me a portion of Indonesia," referring to the bungalow he has rented.

To some extent, the treatment of Kumar humanizes the Indonesian plight. His character is not drawn in great detail, but he *is* rendered as intelligent and his convictions as valid, and as representative of those Indonesians who have been politicized (we also see a PKI demonstration at the American embassy which is fairly objectively depicted). During their trip into the Japanese countryside, Guy says, accusingly, "You're PKI, aren't you?". Kumar answers: "My country suffers under a great weight of poverty and corruption. Is it wrong to want to change that?". However, it is also worth noting that during this sequence Guy's face is fully lit by a candle which has been placed on the table, while Kumar's is in almost total shadow. The conversation continues with Guy asking, "Are you going to be part of it when the killing starts?". Kumar responds, "Sometimes there's no other

way," and Guy says, "Sure, Kumar," which imparts to him something of an edge of moral superiority. Similarly, in one of the final sequences of the film, as Guy lies, his eyes bandaged, in Billy's bungalow, Kumar appears. In the ensuing conversation, in which there is a ritual exchange of American cigarettes ("Still the good cigarettes, boss"), Kumar says to Guy:

Tell me something, am I a stupid man? ... [Guy: "No"] ... Then why should I live a poor man all my life, when stupid people in your country live well ... ["Good question"] ... Then answer it ... ["I can't"] ... Then why do you condemn those in my country who try to do something about it? Mr. Billy Kwan was right—Westerners do not have answers any more.

However, this is followed by Guy's request that Kumar drive him to the airport. While this could also prove advantageous to Kumar, who has been condemned to death for his part in the failed coup and might be able to escape to the countryside, it is in fact issued as a command from superior white boss to inferior Indonesian employee. And once at the airport, Kumar is left behind to his uncertain fate, whereas we follow Guy straight into the arms of his beloved, beyond the reach of danger.

Above all, a great deal of screen time and credibility is given to Billy's political/humanistic convictions, and to his critique of Western attitudes, particularly those of the journalists, who as Billy sees it, abuse their privileged position.



Early on in the film, Billy tells Guy:

I support the view that you don't think about the major issues. You just do whatever you can about the misery that's in front of you. Add your light to the sum of light.

And to Guy's "We [journalists] can't afford to get involved," he responds, "Typical journo's answer." In his next intimate conversation with Guy, during which Guy is looking through his photographs of impoverished Jakartans, Billy tells him:

That's the real Jakarta. Scrounging around for a few handfuls of rice to try to survive for another day. That's the story you journos don't tell.

Guy responds, "Nobody wants to hear it," to which Billy replies, "Tell them anyway." When Billy becomes disillusioned with Guy, we hear him say, in voiceover:

You abuse your position as journalist and grow addicted to risk. You attempt to rule neat lines around yourself, making a fetish of your career and making all relationships temporary lest they disturb that career. Why can't you give yourself? Why can't you learn to love?

And later, after he hears of Curtis's reassignment to Saigon, close to hysteria over the recent death of Ibu's son, he says bitterly:

Curtis got Saigon. Well, we must all drink to that. Where human misery is at its worst, the press will be there in force . . . Saigon. You know, there are people out there fighting for rice. I shot some footage. Does anybody want it?

Billy's convictions do not seem particularly naive or uninformed and yet they always remain vague; they appear to be an amalgam of spirituality, human compassion, pacifist activism, and anti-imperialism. He has various things to say about Sukarno, but beyond the fact that he moves, through the course of the film, from adamant support to total disillusionment with the Indonesian president/dictator, his specific position is never clear. It is suggested that he is a pacifist, and he is certainly anti-PKI: when Kumar, who we later discover is a member of the PKI, comments that the PKI have good discipline, Billy responds, "So did Stalin. He wiped out ten million." Using Billy to undermine the integrity of Kumar's politics is very much in keeping with the trivialization and neutralizing of Billy's own political convictions; in addition, it creates a rift between him as 'Other' and the film's most prominent Third World character, on the basis of their politics.

Billy's concerns can be summed up as follows: (1) the infusion of an ethical imperative into journalistic activities and a continual effort to convince people to pay heed to the plight of others; (2) concrete efforts on his part to alleviate suffering; (3) a harsh critique of the racist/sexist/exploitative attitude of the Western journalists (who stand as sole representatives of Western attitudes); (4) a willingness to take political action at risk to his own life. Unfortunately, the validity of each one of these concerns is compromised in the process of the undermining of Billy's credibility: (1) Although one can assume that Guy, at least, has been to some degree humanized by his contact with Billy, the other journalists seem impervious to Billy's message. In the case of (2) his attempts to provide concrete assistance to Ibu and her ailing child are shown to be futile: the baby dies; (3) the treatment of Billy's discovery of Wally's homosexuality is ambiguous: it is unclear whether he is condemning Wally for sexually exploiting impoverished young male Indonesians just as Curtis exploits the young girls ("starvation is a wonderful aphrodisiac," he says to them); however, while Curtis is

quite clearly depicted as brazenly and obnoxiously guilty of using Indonesian girls as "objects of pleasure," Wally's infraction seems minor and possibly non-existent; this ambiguity undercuts Billy's credibility on this issue, rendering his viewpoint as the possible by-product of hysteria resulting from his own frustration; (4) again, Billy's hoisting of the banner, which results in his death, accomplishes nothing.

The failure of most of these concerns is necessary to the first level of wish fulfillment of the film. As Billy becomes more and more hysterical, increasingly losing credibility (and simultaneously, the power of narration: his voiceovers become less frequent and more desperate and emotional), his convictions seem to be more and more futile, paving the way for their transmutation into his exclusive endorsement of monogamous heterosexual love within the idealized Anglo-Saxon couple.

The film offers an extremely ambivalent portrayal of the politics of the situation in which the film's narrative events occur; co-incident with its project of endorsing an image of 'normality' in sexual terms is the reinstating of normality on racial/political terms. Billy is the chief connection with the 'Otherness' of the Indonesians. Not only is Billy an 'Other' with respect to his dwarfness; he is also half Chinese; besides this, as I've pointed out, it is generally given to Billy to be seen in and amongst Indonesians and to express the film's concern over the plight of the poor. When Billy loses his credibility and centrality, we also lose much of the impact of the film's already somewhat vague political analysis; as the film retracts its invitation to identify with Billy, so does it retract its invitation to identify with his concerns.

The evolution of the identification with 'Other-ness' can be traced through the permutations of the 'eye' motif through the course of the film. The first occurrence is when Kumar tells Guy to remove his sunglasses when he goes into the Presidential palace, because the "palace guards say they can tell an assassin by his eyes." This is shortly followed by the exchange of extreme close-ups between Guy's eyes, as he removes his sunglasses, and those of the Indonesian security guard, and a few seconds later, of Guy's exchange of glances with Sukarno, who is looking down at him from a balcony. Guy then fails to make any actual contact with any of these important Indonesian sources. Shortly after, when they decide to work together on the basis of Billy providing Indonesian political contacts to Guy, Billy says to him, "I can be your eyes," and later he tells Guy that people have remarked upon their looking alike because "we've got the same colour eyes." To this point, the interfusion of the identities of Billy and Guy has been gaining momentum, and Billy has as yet to lose his credibility. The next specific instance of this motif is in the last confrontation between Guy and Billy, in which, after berating him for betraying Jill, Billy cries, "I made you see things. I created you!" By this time the motif has been transformed, if not into the rantings of a "mad little bastard," then into its applicability in the context of Billy having contributed to the relationship between Guy and Jill, and Guy having compromised that relationship. Finally, when Guy's head is struck by an Indonesian soldier, and he runs the risk of losing his eyesight, he lies at Billy's, both eyes bandaged, hallucinating sounds which include Billy's voice saying repeatedly, "All is clouded by desire." He chooses to risk his sight in the wounded eye, tearing off the bandage to get to the airport in time to meet Jill. The implication is clearly that Billy has taught him to see what is really important—but now it has nothing at all to do with the earlier apprenticeship into an



action-oriented empathy with 'Other-ness' and has only to do with the commitment to 'true love.'

## Conclusion

Dreaming . . . discharges the Unconscious excitation, serves it as a safety valve and at the same time preserves the sleep of the preconscious in return for a small expenditure of psychic energy . . . [However] if this attempted wish-fulfilment jars upon the preconscious so violently that it is unable to continue sleeping, then the dream has made a breach in the compromise . . . In that case the dream is immediately broken off and replaced by a state of complete waking.<sup>29</sup>

If I am to follow my analogy to its logical conclusion, I must address the question of whether the spectator remains asleep or is awakened by the film's impact; whether or not the underlying discourse of 'Billy' breaks through the compromises and displacements which constitute the more obvious levels of the film's operations. The film is both moving and ultimately dissatisfying, because it does sacrifice its coherence in order to cover up, by resurrecting the middle-class white Anglo-Saxon couple as the standard for normality, as the emotionally-sustaining nucleus around which social and moral 'goodness' is organized, the more profound idea which inhabits the film—the acknowledgement that we *all* are, in a positive sense, abnormal, and our acceptance of ourselves as 'Other' erases the very category and the inhumane behavior that results from its hold on us. A less profound idea in a mainstream film would not have required the compromises this film makes and could easily have been the basis for a more structurally consistent and satisfying film. I would like to draw on the obvious similarity between Billy as freak, and the monster in the horror film, to cite a comment made by Robin Wood:

. . . the central question of the horror film today . . . [is] the extent to which it is possible to conceive of and create a 'positive' monster. The repressed cannot be released with impunity. If it didn't constitute a threat it wouldn't have been repressed in the first place; and to repress a drive is to some degree to distort and pervert it . . . It is a problem that reaches out far beyond the horror genre and the cinema: its resolution is central to the future of our civilization.<sup>30</sup>

The Billy character goes a long distance towards creating a 'positive monster.' That the character exists in popular cinema is a cause for optimism; that it *is* so compromised, that it isn't given the support of the film's other discourses, is a disappointment. However, to my mind the magnitude of the film's failure to completely undo the character is the measure of the film's more profound success. The dissatisfying residue of many 'failures' of this nature, while not nearly as much as one would hope for, would certainly do more towards our awakening than the normal run of mundane and coherent successes of contemporary mainstream cinema.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Wood, Robin, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 47.
2. Freud, Sigmund, *New Introductory Lectures* (London: Penguin, 1973), p. 105.
3. Freud, Sigmund, *Interpretation of Dreams* (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 650.

4. *ibid.*, p. 596.
5. *ibid.*, pp. 596-7.
6. It is important to acknowledge for the purposes of this discussion that while Weir's *The Year of Living Dangerously* was produced by Australian filmmakers, the film falls clearly into the line of evolution of the classical Hollywood, which is to say, mainstream film. Just as, for instance, *Bringing Up Baby* was highly idiosyncratic but also entirely typical of a thirties genre (screwball comedy), so *The Year of Living Dangerously* is both singular (characterized by Weir's penchant for 'weirdness') and part of a late '70s, early '80s genre, what might be called the stormy-relationship-set-in-politically-volatile-circumstances drama, eg. *Missing*, *Under Fire*, *Silkwood*, *China Syndrome*, etc., and in which the use of Third World settings is currently beginning to constitute a sub-genre of sorts.
7. Metz, Christian, "The Imaginary Signifier, *Screen*, Summer, 1975, p. 19.
8. Freud, Sigmund *op. cit.* p. 650.
9. Jameson, Frederic, *The Political Unconscious*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 182-83.
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11. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p. 183.
12. Freud, *op. cit.* p. 608.
13. Fiedler, Leslie, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), pp. 27-8.
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16. Koch, C.J., *The Year of Living Dangerously* (New York: Penguin, 1978), p. 205.
17. Dinen, Muriel, "Notes for the Reconstruction of Sexuality," *Social Text*, Fall, 1982, pp.28-9.
18. Mitchell, Juliet, *op. cit.* p.10.
19. Wood, Robin, *The American Nightmare* (Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979), p. 9.
20. Koch, *op. cit.* p. 82.
21. *ibid.* p. 132.
22. Freud, *op. cit.* p. 676.
23. *ibid.* p. 605.
24. *ibid.* p. 608.
25. Burgoyne, Robert, "Narrative and Sexual Excess," *October*, No. 21, Summer, 1982, p. 51.
26. Frye, Northrop, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 193.
27. Fiedler, *op. cit.* p. 41.
28. Jameson, Frederic, "On Diva," *Social Text*, Fall, 1982, p. 17.
29. Freud, *op. cit.* pp. 735-6.
30. Wood, *op. cit.* p. 32.



# Hitchcock's *Spellbound*: Text and Counter-Text

by Andrew Britton

ONE CAN DISCERN IN *SPELLBOUND* THE elements of three of Hitchcock's favorite narrative-structures:

(1) the double-chase, in which the hero, in pursuit of the real villain, is himself pursued mistakenly by the police (e.g. *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, *Saboteur*).

(2) the romantic love-story, usually characterised by some form of tension or struggle for mastery between the partners (e.g. *Notorious*, *Marnie*).

(3) the psychopath story, in which the male protagonist is gradually revealed to be insane and criminal (e.g. *Shadow of a Doubt*, *Psycho*).

These three simple, schematised structures, or delicate variations and modifications of them, usually co-exist in any one film: and in the case of *Spellbound*, one can relate them quite distinctly to explicit ideological projects.

The first of these is the validation of psychoanalysis as, simultaneously, the science of 'the truth' and the science of 'normality'—a project spelt out for us in the caption which follows the credits. An incomplete quotation from Shakespeare ("The fault is not in our stars, but in ourselves") which, in context, has nothing to do with psychological disorder—it is part of Cassius's plea to Brutus for revolution—introduces a preamble which tells us that psychoanalysis is a method of treating "the emotional problems of the sane." Once these have been "uncovered and interpreted," the "illness and confusion disappear, and the devils of unreason are driven from the human soul."

The vocabulary suggests that the attainment of 'normality' (reason) is like the entry to a state of grace, and that psychoanalysis is analogous to exorcism. This association of science and the casting out of demons, which unites, on the one hand, an appeal to a belief in the rigorous, objective finality of empirical evidence, and, on the other, to the mystic notion of ritual purification, establishes psychoanalysis as a kind of secular religion, the embodiment of the union of two forms of ultimate authority.

This emphasis is obviously well-served by the use of the detection/manhunt story. Through a variation of the double-chase format, the villain whom the hero and heroine are pursuing becomes the hero's neurosis, and his cure becomes the removal of the stigma of guilt and of abnormality—the assurance of his 'innocence.' This is intensified by the fact that there is also a 'real,' human villain involved, Dr. Murchison, who has to be unmasked by Constance (just as she has been the driving impulse behind the cure of Ballantyne) before total harmony can be restored. The conclusion of the narrative elides the discovery of (a) the hero's neurosis (b) the real villain (c) the 'truth'—so that the achievement of psychological certainty is colored by the unmasking of a murderer. The implica-

tion is that just as one can assign a crime to a criminal, and solve it, so one can assign a neurosis to a trauma, and cure it. Indeed, the traumatic event in Ballantyne's life is itself a crime; and his triumphant cry as his memory returns—"I didn't kill my brother! It was an accident!"—conveys his liberation from both guilt and disease. The aberrations are cleared away, and a conclusive state of ideological confidence is established, both on the social level (the crime has been solved and the hero is innocent) and on the psychological level (the hero has been purified and is now normal).

The second ideological project is familiar from numerous Hollywood movies: the 'managing,' independent, professional and/or intellectual woman becomes a 'real' woman by falling in love with the hero. In *Spellbound*, this process unfolds in parallel to the hero's cure, and is presented, through the imagery and dialogue, as analogous to it. Constance's 'manlessness' is characterised by frustration, repression, and the usurpation of the male role, and the film ends with the 'cure' of her frigidity and her accession to her proper place as Ballantyne's wife. Her role as an analyst has been played out in the course of the action, in that (a) she has cured Ballantyne, (b) she has discovered the real criminal, through psychoanalysis, (c) she has found 'herself.' As the only other patients with whom we see her involved, Miss Carmichael and Mr. Garmes, function as symbolic projections of herself and Ballantyne, there is no need either in narrative or symbolic terms, for Constance to be an analyst anymore. The film begins with both characters 'misplaced' inside Green Manors, their 'true' identities suppressed (Ballantyne in the role of Edwardes, Constance in that of prim, 'sexless' physician). The achievement of essential identity at the end is again reinforced by its juxtaposition with a similar process (the clearing of the wrong man, the revelation of the right man) in the detective story.

The two projects are brought together through the door imagery which informs the whole film. In the opening caption, and repeatedly in the dialogue, the discovery of the causes of neurosis is expressed in terms of the unlocking of doors; and the caption is superimposed over a shot of the stately door of Green Manors, set between pillars in a grandiose, mock-classic portico. At once, the detection of trauma and the detection of the crime are linked. Green Manors is the house of Dr. Murchison, and the film moves towards Constance's final penetration of its 'sanctum sanctorum,' Dr. Murchison's study, and her unveiling of the mystery, a scene to which I shall return later. Finally, the scene culminating in the couple's first embrace is based on the door motif—most obviously, in the shot of a vista of opening doors superimposed on Constance's

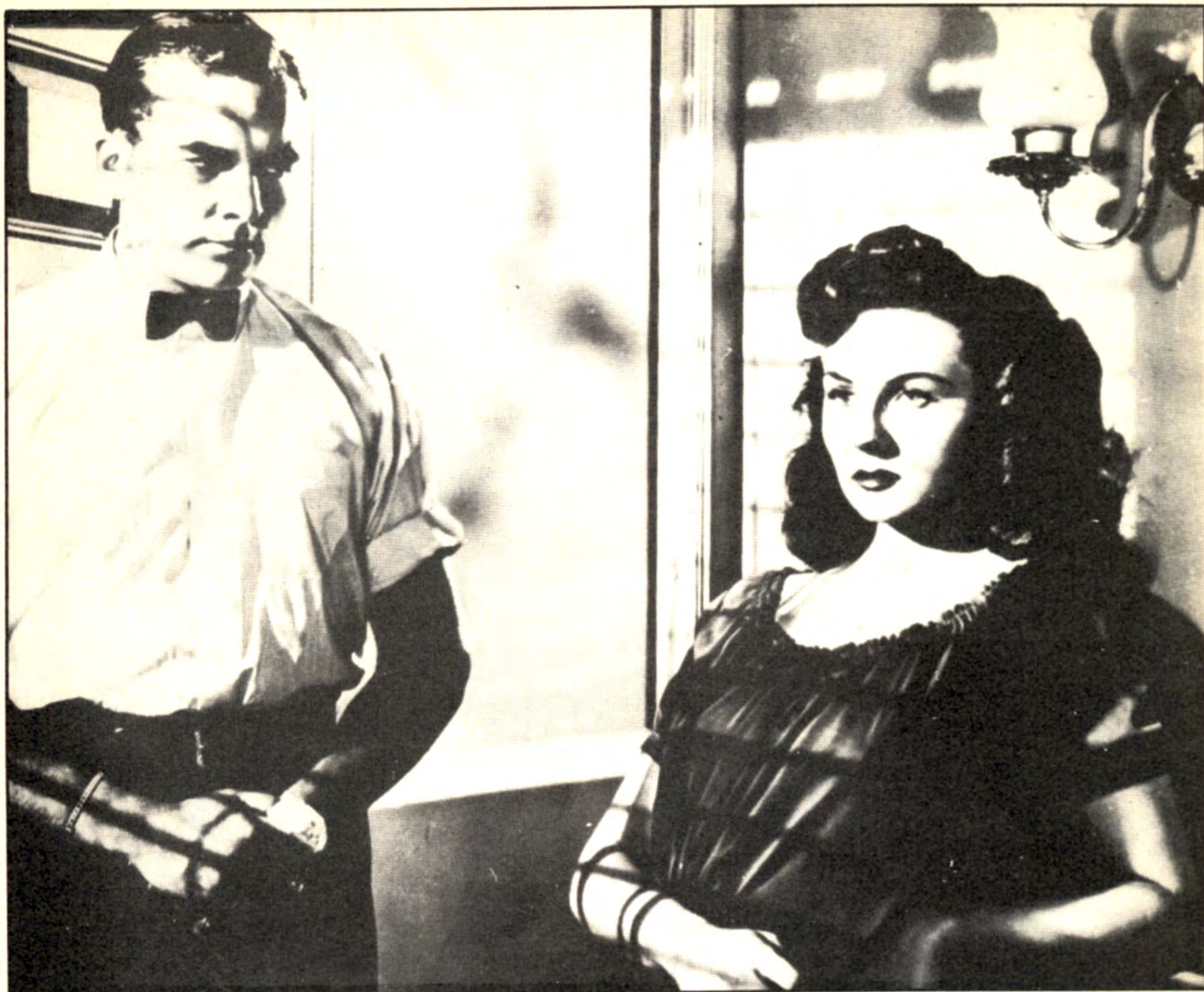
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OPPOSITE—*Spellbound*: Ingrid Bergman as Constance.









Harry and Miss Carmichael.

face to suggest her 'release' at the moment of the kiss; but also insisted on in the preliminary detail of the scene—the subjective tracking-shot towards Ballantyne's door and Constance's hesitation outside it; her choice of the library door before she dares to enter Ballantyne's room; and finally, the threshold of the bedroom which separates the couple, until Ballantyne crosses it and they are united in the kiss.

I wish to suggest that the scene-by-scene realisation in *Spellbound* consistently works against the conclusions of the narrative, and that although every detail of Constance's and Ballantyne's 'case' is systematically explained and accounted for, it is implied, equally systematically, that this explicit solution is no solution at all. I will begin by considering the opening of the film.

*Spellbound* begins by establishing a very intricate pattern of contrasts, similarities and parallels between the characters presented through a series of meetings and conversations, as in the following chart:

- I Miss Carmichael playing cards. Interruption (summons from Constance). Miss Carmichael leaves with Harry, the guard.
- II Harry and Miss Carmichael on their way to Constance's office.

- III (a) Entry of Harry and Miss Carmichael to Constance's office. Departure of Harry.
- (b) Constance and Miss Carmichael. Latter's outburst leads to
- (c) Entry of Harry and Dr. Fleurot. Harry leaves with Miss Carmichael.
- (d) Constance and Dr. Fleurot, interrupted by
- (e) Entry of Dr. Murchison. Departure of Dr. Fleurot.
- (f) Constance and Dr. Murchison, interrupted by
- (g) Entry of Harry and Mr. Garmes. Constance sees 'Dr. Edwardes' through the window as he arrives for the first time. Cut to
- IV (a) Doctors speculating about Dr. Edwardes. Enter 'Dr. Edwardes'/Ballantyne.
- (b) 'Edwardes'/Ballantyne and his new colleagues. Enter Dr. Murchison.
- (c) Meeting of 'Edwardes'/Ballantyne and Murchison. Exit Dr. Murchison. Fade out.
- V (a) Dining-room. Fleurot, Murchison, Constance and other doctors discussing Dr. Edwardes. Enter 'Edwardes'/Ballantyne.
- (b) First meeting of 'Edwardes'/Ballantyne and Constance. 'Love at first sight': crisis.



It will be seen that the conversations are built round the entrances and exits of various characters; and this is particularly evident in the third scene, where each conversation is marked by the arrival of the next character and the departure of the previous one. The scene is given a further symmetry by the use of Harry, the guard, who brings in Miss Carmichael in III (a) and introduces Mr. Garmes in III (g); and by the arrangement of the meetings—two with patients, two with doctors, the latter inserted between the former. Let us consider these four encounters in turn, in the light of the ideological projects that have been described.

The film begins with a brief scene (I) in which we see Miss Carmichael/Rhonda Fleming, the 'nymphomaniac' patient, playing cards with a group of other patients, the game being interrupted by a summons from Dr. Constance Peterson/Ingrid Bergman. Miss Carmichael leaves, saying that she had had "a perfect hand," and "would've beaten the pants off you," and when she enters Constance's office, tells her that she has "ruined a very interesting card game." The sexual symbolism of the game of cards, and the motif of a doctor trumping or spoiling the patient's hand, is resumed in Ballantyne's dream (to be considered more fully later), where the analyst-figure miraculously beats Ballantyne with blank cards. The suggestion in both cases is that the cards are loaded inevitably in favor of the doctor; and in both cases, the patient's defeat—the repression of sexual drives, the suggestion of impotence or inferiority (Miss Carmichael accuses Constance of wanting to "feel superior" to her)—is followed by an assault on the analyst: Miss Carmichael's outburst, physical and verbal, against Constance, and Dr. Edwardes' fall from the roof. The notion that the patient's symptoms are a response to persecution by a figure of authority is central to the film.

An explicit iconographic antithesis is at once established between Constance and Miss Carmichael. Constance's hair is gathered up on her head in a tight bun; Miss Carmichael's is loose around her shoulders. Constance wears glasses (for a woman, an instant signifier of 'intellectuality' in Hollywood movies) and a white, 'sexless' doctor's overall, and when we first see her at the desk, she has a cigarette in a holder in one hand and a pen in the other, the phallic symbolism underlining her masculine appearance and her status as an 'authority.' Miss Carmichael wears a skirt and a loose, plunging blouse, and is offered very obviously as a type of seductive femininity: she moves with nonchalant, sensuous grace, and drapes herself on a chair, in contrast with the erectness of Constance's posture, and the precision of her movements. The opposition 'doctor/patient' is thus redefined as the opposition 'repression or denial of femininity/magnification of femininity'—both being, in the terms of Hollywood convention, abnormal states. The nymphomaniac and the intellectual woman are both seen as threats in that they both possess characteristics regarded as the prerogatives of men—in the former case, sexual aggression, and in the latter, mental penetration (knowledge, and the ability to pursue and acquire it independently), sometimes combined, as in this case, with an institutional position. Constance and Miss Carmichael are both 'phallic' women; and it is significant that the scenes II-III (h) begin with the latter's 'attack' on Harry with her nails, when she takes his hand in an apparent attempt to seduce him, and ends with Constance causing acute distress to Mr. Garmes by cutting open her mail with a paper-knife. Again, the ostensible antithesis (abnormal patient attacks her guard/doctor about to resume the attempted cure of her patient) is subverted by the symbolic parallel. Both incidents suggest the transference of potency to the woman, and an experience of emasculation by the man—a reading stressed particularly in the second

incident by the fact that (i) Constance refuses Mr. Garmes's offer to cut the envelopes for her with "I can do this myself very well"; (ii) at that moment she is watching, through the window, the arrival of the man who is going to displace Dr. Murchison.

Thus Miss Carmichael is related, in the film's symbolic scheme, both to Ballantyne—in that both are Constance's patients, and both succumb to breakdown or violence at moments of extreme erotic tension in response to what is interpreted as Constance's aggression—and to Constance herself, in that she is simultaneously sensual and repressed, sexual desire co-existing with a strenuous denial of it.

At the beginning of the scene, Miss Carmichael occupies more or less the position of the sceptical spectator: "Psychoanalysis bores the pants off me." The phrase, which echoes the one she has just used to her opponents in the card-game, when she speaks of "beating the pants off" them, marks her transition from potency and power as the prospective winner to the subjected role of patient. This strategy, ostensibly the film's *raison d'être*, is elaborated in the encounter between Ballantyne and Dr. Brulov/Michael Chekhov: a character, and, by extension, the spectator, is initiated into the mysteries, and made aware of the perspective in which experience/the narrative is intelligible. There is, in fact, a fundamental tension at this point between the film's two projects: the woman who is 'presenting' psychoanalysis to the patient who embodies sexual 'excess' is herself seen as sexually repressed.

Miss Carmichael, to Constance, is a typical case—she has told "the usual proportion" of lies under analysis. The former, lying on the couch, admits this, and, with sudden, uncontrollable vehemence, launches into an account of how she bit off the moustache of a man who tried to make a pass at her. This castration fantasy, which anticipates Constance's role in the ensuing narrative, is introduced by the phrase "I hate men," on which Hitchcock cuts to a close-up of Constance, clearly alarmed and personally touched by the violence of the confession.

Reacting against this intense self-revelation, Miss Carmichael turns on Constance, denouncing both her as an individual ("Miss Frozen-Puss!") and the notion of 'scientific detachment' as such ("You and your drooling science!"). We think back to the transition between scenes one and two, which is marked by a dissolve to Harry and Miss Carmichael in the corridor from the sharp, angular face of a nurse who whispers to Harry as he is leaving, "Don't take your eyes off her!": the dissolve, in preference to the simple cut (there is no time-lapse), suggesting the lingering, prying gaze of the nurse. The notion of persecution through a look is central to the film.

The outburst prompts the arrival of Harry and Dr. Fleurot. Miss Carmichael allows herself to be led away, after an attempt to make a pass at Fleurot, which he, in his role of doctor and authority, circumvents. The moment he is alone with Constance, however, he takes up Miss Carmichael's accusations, telling her that her work is "brilliant but lifeless," and that she lacks the "human emotional experience" necessary to "treat a love-veteran like Carmichael." His remarks lead into a declaration of his fondness for her, which she rejects—"You sense your own desires and pulsations. I assure you that mine in no way resemble them"—and the conversation moves towards a confirmation of the parallel between Fleurot and Miss Carmichael, first established explicitly in the dialogue (Fleurot declares that he feels "exactly like Miss Carmichael"), and elaborated in the use of the book which Miss Carmichael has thrown at Constance at the end of the previous dialogue. Fleurot, when his kiss produces no effect, murmurs resignedly that "it's rather like embracing a text-



book," and then, as he is about to leave, asks if he can borrow the book, which he has picked up from the floor. He is just telling her that "I think you'd better stick to books" when Dr. Murchison enters the room.

The notion of reading as a sublimation of sexual desire, of the book as a surrogate for a human object, re-emerges a few scenes later, when Constance, repressing her longing to go into Ballantyne's room, goes into the library instead and gets down Edwardes' book—one of a limited edition which has been personally autographed by the author. Here, it is Fleurot who is forced to seek alternative satisfaction; and it is significant that Dr. Murchison should appear for the first time at the moment of Constance's denial of her sexuality and the arousal/frustration of Fleurot—the two elements which will characterise her relationship with Ballantyne. With the single exception of this third encounter, all the conversations in the scene end with Constance inciting some form of neurotic disquiet in her partner.

Leo G. Carroll's Dr. Murchison is clearly in the main tradition of Hitchcock's villains—charming, refined, immaculately 'civilized'; and although the character is not developed, he is an essential part of the film's organization. The Ballantyne/Constance/Murchison relationship anticipates the triangular adulterous affairs of the later films with Ingrid Bergman. In both *Notorious* and *Under Capricorn*, Bergman is caught between an older man, her husband (Claude Rains, Joseph Cotten), who is clearly deeply attached to her, a younger, attractive lover (Cary Grant, Michael Wilding), the nature of whose love is ambiguous, who is involved in the causes of the heroine's predicament, and who disrupts the marital relationship by intruding into the husband's house. (I am, obviously, schematising here, but this basic pattern is present and important.) *Spellbound* relates significantly to this structure, though, in the nature of the subject, the particular inflection is different.

Murchison, Green Manors, and Constance's position as analyst/intellectual/repressed, 'denatured' woman, are inextricably bound together. We can distinguish various elements in their conversation.

(1) Murchison seems to materialise out of Constance's rejection of Fleurot, and his arrival drives Fleurot out of the room; the denial of sexuality is underlined by the affirmation of loyalty to Murchison. As Fleurot leaves, Constance tells him that she won't come with him, as she is "in no mad hurry to welcome Dr. Edwardes," and one of her first remarks to Murchison is "You *are* Green Manors." The hostility to eroticism and to the idea of Murchison's replacement are thus linked together, with, in addition, the hint that just as Fleurot's obsession with sex unites him with Miss Carmichael, so he is "mad" in his concern about Edwardes' arrival.

(2) Resignation, maturity, freedom from illusion. Constance tells Murchison that his behavior is "a lesson in how to accept reality," to which he replies, "Don't be too taken in by my happy air, Constance"—an exchange which is charged with irony by the subsequent narrative. Murchison's crime is, precisely, an evasion of the reality of his dismissal, and his very disclaimer augments the effect of his stoicism, and Constance's admiration for it.

(3) Youth and age. This theme is strongly emphasised in the opening scenes, and both the group of doctors who first meet Ballantyne, and then Murchison himself (it is his first remark, as he comes through another door), comment on the fact that Ballantyne is "younger than expected." Murchison tells Constance that it is "the basic secret of science" that "the old must make way for the new"; and Hitchcock maintains a subtle balance here between a sense of Murchison as a figure of

reaction and repression, resisting the new, and as a victim of the ideological obsession with youth. He is "as able and brilliant as ever," but "having crumpled once, I might crumple again": and it is made clear that his breakdown is a response to the threat to his position at Green Manors. He has been "like a new man since his vacation" because the murder of Edwardes has removed that threat.

The main importance of the age/youth antithesis in *Spellbound* lies in its Oedipal connotations, which are variously emphasised in the four main characters:

- (a) Constance's resentment of Murchison's replacement;
- (b) Ballantyne's desire for/revulsion from Constance;
- (c) Murchison's plot against Edwardes, and then Ballantyne;
- (d) Brulov's resentment of Ballantyne.

Constance's progress is marked by the gradual movement away from the two possessive father-figures, Murchison and Brulov, and the movement towards Ballantyne—a movement which is, simultaneously, a rejection and violation of the psychoanalytical practice which they endorse, and which, for them, puts her on a level of irrationality practically comparable to her patient's. Hence the constant identification of love and madness throughout the film: Ballantyne tells Constance "I think you're quite mad—you're much crazier than I am"; and when he asks her if she will "love him just as much when he's normal," she replies, "I'll be crazy about you." The theme receives its most extensive treatment in a long conversation between Constance and Brulov, when he tells her that a woman in love "is functioning on the lowest level of the intellect." Indeed, his decision to help her rather than turn Ballantyne over to the police, is expressed in terms of humoring, and himself partly assuming, her madness—"I'll pretend to myself that I'm acting sensible for a few days." There is the constant tension in the film between the presentation of a 'rational' science, and the fact that the only creative use of it we see is based on feelings which are totally irrational (trust, faith, love, intuition) and methods which go against every precept for its successful operation.

Constance's affirmation of loyalty to Murchison (III f) is balanced on one side, as we have seen, by her rejection of Fleurot, and on the other by the scene with Mr. Garmes, the paper-knife, and the arrival of 'Edwardes'/Ballantyne, the knife suggesting an assumption of potency, and an attack on newcomer and patient (between whom, as we shall see, an important symbolic parallel exists). Her rejection of Murchison in the film's penultimate scene is characterised by the turning against him of the aggression originally excited on his behalf, and reverses the pattern of Scene III: the series of incursions into Constance's room, the repeated agitation and undermining of her position, is balanced by the visit to the study, in which she becomes the intruder.

This final confrontation again turns on a transference of sexual potency, and is riddled with sexual imagery. Murchison gives himself away to Constance, at what is, apparently, his moment of triumph (the 'recapture' of Constance, the murder of Edwardes and the conviction of Ballantyne; i.e. the elimination of the rivals for Green Manors and for Constance) as they are standing in the doorway of Constance's room, when he says that he knew Edwardes slightly (he has earlier professed never to have met him). Left alone, Constance, disturbed by the remark, walks slowly towards her bedroom, Murchison's words echoing distortedly on the soundtrack; and she grasps their significance as she is standing in the far doorway, her arms spread out grasping the uprights of the frame. She goes upstairs; and Hitchcock repeats the forward subjective tracking-shot towards the door used earlier for Constance's wary, fascinated approach to the room then occupied by Ballantyne.



The explicit acknowledgement of Freud invites a psychoanalytical reading of the film's imagery, and the use of doors here is especially interesting. For Freud, doors are a female symbol in dreams. Thus Constance, unshakably committed to Ballantyne, refuses Murchison entry to her room; and the track towards Murchison's door, which places us in Constance's position, and which associates the female symbol with the man, exactly expresses the scene's symbolic force—Constance's potency is re-established by her knowledge of the crime, her penetration of the secret, and her visit is an act of sexual aggression. The shot also creates a link to the earlier scene with Ballantyne, and suggests that the breakdown of the men towards which both encounters move is a response to that aggression.

Murchison agrees, unwillingly, to discuss Ballantyne's dream ("Nocturnal conferences are bad for the nerves"), and comments with paternal condescension on Constance's loyalty, "one of your most attractive characteristics." As he says this, he reaches for his cigarette-case, and throughout the rest of the scene, until he throws it away into the grate at the moment of his confession, he is fingering and stroking a cigarette which he never lights. The phallic symbolism of the cigarette, here suggesting Murchison's impotence (because unlit and then discarded), recalls both Constance's first appearance, and a moment in a conversation between her and Ballantyne after his breakdown in the operating theatre, when he tells her that the only clue he has of his real identity is a cigarette-case which he found in his pocket, with the initials 'J.B.' engraved on it.

After the confession, the cigarette is replaced by the gun, which Murchison also strokes coolly as he points it at Constance. As with Garmes and Ballantyne, the response to the woman's assertion of her potency is violence: her possession of the phallus is barred by his possession of the gun. In all three cases, the men are also responding to Constance's knowledge, her use of her intellect. Garmes and Ballantyne are her patients, the latter constantly attacking her for her insistent probing of his memory (he calls her "a phoney King Solomon" and "a smug-nosed old schoolmistress"); and Murchison is now exposed by her detection of his guilt. It is notable also that Murchison remarks on Constance's "agile young mind." Through her association with Ballantyne, she is no longer the object of desire, but an embodiment of the threat of youth to age associated with his professional rivals. At the same time, he begins to abuse and ridicule her devotion to her lover ("A love-smitten analyst playing a dream-detective").

Constance triumphs over Murchison in a manner which exactly reverses the procedures of her science. Psychoanalysis as the film defines it is the means whereby the analyst guides the patient towards the recognition of the truth about himself. Constance escapes from Murchison by an exertion of controlling will which is close to hypnosis, staring at him with an unwavering, oppressive gaze, and imposing a lie on him—if he lets her go, the police will treat him leniently ("They'll find extenuating circumstances in the state of your health"), and he will be able to continue to work and research in prison. Constance's stare is the final, and supreme, expression of her superior power (earlier in the scene, Murchison has wearily hidden his own eyes behind his hand for a moment), and the man responds by turning his weapon on himself.

The father-figure is split into two in the film; and Murchison's analogue is Dr. Brulov/Michael Chekhov, Constance's former teacher. Brulov is first mentioned at the moment of Ballantyne's first breakdown at the dinner-table, when Constance says that Ballantyne's irrational behavior reminds her of him—a remark which both underlines the emphasis on the

neurosis of the analysts, and recalls the Freudian formulation that the choice of love-object is affected by recollections of a parent (Constance has just fallen in love with Ballantyne at first sight).

The parallels with the other male characters are striking. During his conversation with the policemen, Brulov agitatedly manipulates a knife in his hands, and his response to being questioned again is the remark, "What is this kind of persecution?" From what he says, we learn that his disagreement with Dr. Edwardes at a conference they both attended resulted in an outburst of violence (kicking over chairs) and his furious departure from the lecture-hall: and his exasperation at Constance's irrational commitment to Ballantyne induces him to start smoking compulsively; spilling all his matches in the process. The overtones of impotence, sterility, sexual isolation, loneliness, are very strong. Brulov asserts that his housekeeper "hates" him (we have seen the housekeeper briefly when the couple arrive at the house—a perfectly innocuous woman, worrying about the professor missing his evening meal), and describes himself as "living on my own with a can opener." When he is fetching the milk for Ballantyne, he remarks that he is "glad to have company," and that although he longed when he was young "to get alone by myself instead of wasting my time with people," now, in old age, "everything becomes just the opposite." As he is handing Ballantyne the drugged liquid, he is saying that old people cause all the trouble in the world, and the last words we hear before Ballantyne loses consciousness (the camera puts us in his place as he drinks, so that the upturned glass and milk gradually fill the screen) is Brulov's toast to youth—"to when we are young and know nothing." He will later, of course, while Ballantyne is unconscious and "knows nothing," try to persuade Constance to let him have him arrested.

Brulov's attitude to the couple ranges from an initial sentimentalism to the resentment of Ballantyne which has more explicit sexual connotations than in Murchison's case. His first reaction is to canonise them (they pretend to be newly-weds) as the embodiment of an unfallen innocence and purity—the ideal, young, *normal* American couple—in which the equivalent of the worm in the bud is mental 'disease.' He tells them that "there is nothing so nice as a new marriage—no psychosis yet, no aggressions, no guilt-complex," and wishes them "babies and not phobias." We are reminded of a remark by Ballantyne earlier, just after the departure of Mr. Garmes and the mysterious phone call from Edwardes's secretary, when he tells Constance that some fresh air would do them both good, and they can go and see some "sane trees, normal grass, and clouds without complexes." In both cases, the explicit suggestion that there are at least *some* things which are uncontaminated ('normal' marriage, and the country walk and picnic on which Constance begins to thaw) is quietly undermined by the implication that both speakers are neurotics.

Brulov's second reaction is a belittling, sarcastic revulsion from Constance's foolhardiness and irrationality ("a school-girl in love with an actor"). Brulov is, obviously, not identical to Murchison, and their characteristics ('Europeanness,' irascibility, excitability, gnome-like old age, as opposed to the 'Englishness,' suavity, self-control, finesse, sinister middle-age) are readily distinguished by the film. But in both cases, the presence of Ballantyne emerges as a personal threat. Brulov clearly takes over Constance at once as daughter/pupil/servant ("This morning I get some *real* coffee!"); and his repeated insistence that personal, emotional involvement and science are incompatible (the remark, for instance, that women make the best psychoanalysts until they fall in love, when they make the best patients—which equates, deroga-



tively, love and irrationality, and which is one of numerous remarks which suggest that Constance is only saved from "the usual female contradictions" by the discipline of her work), ties in significantly with his advice to her at the end of the film, when both he and Murchison recommend repression and sublimation as a cure for her attachment to Ballantyne.

American ideology is founded quite explicitly on the notion of work as the sublimation of sexual drives; in Franklin's words, "Industry and constant employment are great preservatives of the morals of a nation"—Hitchcock explores the concept extensively in *Shadow of a Doubt*. At the end of *Spellbound*, after the apparent irrefutable revelation of Ballantyne's guilt, Constance has returned to Green Manors. She has returned also to Brulov and Murchison, and the authority they represent; to an environment characterised by age, paternal possessiveness, and impotence, Murchison's gun and unlit cigarette being balanced and reinforced by the cane which Brulov grasps throughout his conversation with Constance. He insists to her that she can't keep on "bumping her head against reality and pretending it isn't there"; and the remark echoes Constance's praise of Murchison's 'realism' in III (f), creating a disturbing network of ironies. Brulov's demand that she "accept reality," which, in his role as psychanalyst, is the nature of his demand on a patient, becomes, in effect, a demand for acquiescence: Constance must accept the law, both psychoanalytic law (he and Murchison have diagnosed Ballantyne as a schizophrenic) and legal process (Ballantyne has been found guilty of murder). Work within that law thus becomes the means of repressing the sense of loss and constructing a "fresh or substitute satisfaction which has become necessary owing to the fact of frustration" (Freud's words in a discussion of symptom-formation). "There's lots of happiness in working hard—perhaps the most," Brulov tells her; and after he has left, Murchison repeats the injunction to "try to forget things better forgotten."

We thus arrive at the point at which the two representatives of psychological health attempt to direct the heroine on the path towards neurosis: and it is at this point that the identity of that science with patriarchal law and its prescribed 'normality' is clinched. Indeed, the dialogue indicates that Constance is in a state similar to Murchison's before his 'vacation'—"I know that feeling of exhaustion only too well. One must humor it before it explodes." Murchison's outlet has been the murder of Edwardes; the outlet for Constance, Ballantyne and the narrative (*their* resolution) is the death of Murchison.

Before passing on to the Constance-Ballantyne relationship, it is useful to remark at this point, while the subversion of psychoanalysis is in question, on an incident in which the parallel between analysis and detection, so central to the film's attempt to confirm ideological confidence (Constance becomes, in Ballantyne's words, "a great analyst and a great detective"), is subtly undercut. I am thinking of Constance's encounter with the hotel detective who helps her in her search for Ballantyne after he has absconded from Green Manors; an encounter which is elaborated beyond its strict narrative function, and which at first sight seems a mere *jeu d'esprit*.

The detective first rescues Constance from the advances of an obese drunk who tries to pick her up in the lobby, and who sports a phallic cigar—the symbolism, in association with the theme of loneliness and isolation and the desire for Constance to alleviate it ("A fella could live and die in this town and never meet nobody"), uniting him to the film's central father-figures. The kindly detective interprets Constance's plight as that of a distraught wife seeking her fugitive husband to beg his forgiveness; and the conversation is built on this confident error, in which, gradually, Constance begins to collaborate, to

win his sympathy and gain his help. The detective describes himself as "a kind of psychologist," and his reading of Constance's situation is based on what, from experience, he has found to be "the usual psychology"; so that the meeting is suddenly recast as that between analyst and patient, with the latter carefully exploiting the complacent self-assurance of the former, who misreads the symptoms completely, treating his subject as a typical 'case' (as Constance has done previously—"He fits perfectly into your chapter on the guilt-complex"). Her situation has been reversed. This is the first scene in the film (apart from the country-walk, in which the collapse of the analyst persona begins) which takes place outside Green Manors, and, as the prospective accomplice of a wanted man, she is the victim rather than the representative of institutional authority. There are hints again, here, of the equation of analyst and policeman, mental patient and criminal, in which 'abnormality' becomes an ideological offence. It is implied that Constance herself must 'break the law'—both police-law (by running away with the suspect) and analytical law (by acting 'madly')—and join Ballantyne on the wrong side of it before she can help either him or herself. Her 'science' must partake of its share of 'insanity.'

Green Manors itself can be read both as a social microcosm and as a monstrous, perverted family, characterised at once by sexual repression, a claustrophobic lack of privacy, and a pervasive immaturity and childishness. Fleurot's style and manner (slicked hair, thin moustache, smart suit, leering innuendo) suggests the superficially sophisticated, big-city charmer, a familiar inhabitant of *film noir*, and his encounters with Constance recall those between Joan Fontaine and George Sanders in *Rebecca*. Constance twice remarks on the childishness of the doctors, first reacting against Fleurot's insinuations about her attraction to Ballantyne ("I detest that sort of high-school talk"), and then the concerted sarcasm, led once more by Fleurot ("You look as if you've been having an instructive time"), which greets her on her late return from the country-walk, and which prompts her to compare the staff dinner-table to a kindergarten. Again, in the scene in the library after Ballantyne disappears from Green Manors, the doctors talk casually and unconcernedly about his probable fate, to Constance's acute distress (her feelings communicated to us by a slow track-in to a close-up of her face), and Fleurot turns the conversation into an attack on Constance herself—"A woman like you could never become emotionally involved with any man, sane or insane." Thus the three male doctors in the film are used to suggest various responses to the fact of sexual repression. If, in Brulov, it gives rise to an idealisation of the 'normal,' a commitment to the supreme value of work as sublimation, and a tendency to see love as a silly female illusion (Constance's love transforms a "schizophrenic" into a "Valentine"); if, in Murchison, it produces psychosis; then in Fleurot it leads to malicious callousness: when Constance does not respond to his advances, she becomes the "human glacier"—an accusation which exactly mirrors Miss Carmichael's ("Miss Frozen-Puss!"). The treatment of Fleurot here (together, of course, with the warmth and intelligence conveyed in Bergman's performance) plays its part in qualifying the ideological project about the making of a 'real' woman which I outlined above: although, because Fleurot is so eminently 'unsympathetic' in comparison with Ballantyne, the project remains *substantially* unaffected. One might remark also, in the library scene, on the complex effect achieved by Murchison's coming to Constance's defence, and in terms which echo her comments on the doctors' immaturity—he apologises that "our staff still retains the manners of medical students," with that consideration and courtesy so typical of



Hitchcock's villains (consider, especially, Claude Rains in *Notorious*).

This brings us to the film's central relationship. Constance's devotion to Ballantyne is obviously intended to reconcile the psychoanalytic theme with the emphasis on romantic love and sexual awakening: her role as analyst/detective is effectual because her commitment to his cure derives its force from a love which is repeatedly shown to be 'crazy'—precisely *l'amour fou*. On another level, the film almost becomes, through the heroine's name, a fable about the constancy of woman (c.f. Chaucer's Constance in *The Man of Law's Tale*), and the redeeming power of woman's love, which coincides with the religious dimension imparted to psychoanalysis by the introductory caption. Guided by Constance, Ballantyne descends into the inferno of the unconscious, and returns whole and sound—a traditional enough romantic theme, which receives its baldest statement in the scene on the station platform about halfway through the film. Surrounded by embracing couples, Ballantyne tells Constance "There's nothing wrong with me that a good long kiss wouldn't cure," to which she replies that "I've never treated a guilt-complex that way before." However, the film constantly implies, on the contrary, that Constance aggravates Ballantyne's symptoms, and that his neurosis, whatever account may be given of it in the narrative, is sexual in nature.

One might begin by noting that the incidents associated with the neurosis have erotic connotations. Ballantyne has

burnt his hand in a *flying* accident, and the two crucial traumatic experiences (the death of his brother, the death of Edwardes) both involve hurtling uncontrollably down a slope. They also involve, respectively, a boy and a man, and two of Ballantyne's breakdowns occur when Constance forces him to re-live with her what he did previously with Dr. Edwardes (buying the railway-ticket, going down the ski-run). We think of Freud's suggestion that flying dreams "have to be interpreted as dreams of general sexual excitement," and that "gliding or sliding" are "symbolic representations *par excellence* of masturbation." Similarly, the razor scene strikingly anticipates the atmosphere of the shower-murder in *Psycho*, in which Norman Bates resorts to a sharp instrument and violence as a substitute for the rape he cannot commit. Robin Wood has suggested that the attempt to explain away Uncle Charlie in *Shadow of a Doubt* as an aberrant monster by means of his childhood accident (ideologically necessary in a '40s Hollywood film) may also be interpreted as a euphemism for sexual trauma: we are told that Charlie, "such a quiet boy" before the crash on his bicycle ("You didn't know how to handle it"), is perpetually in trouble afterwards, as if "he had to get up to mischief to blow off steam." In both films, the 'safe' explanation becomes more, rather than less, troublingly suggestive. In *Spellbound*, too, the fact that Ballantyne is a returned serviceman relates the film to a contemporary group of movies (including *The Blue Dahlia* and *Crossfire*) dealing with demobilised and/or wounded ex-soldiers and sexual



Analyst and patient: the bedroom.



pathology (William Bendix in *The Blue Dahlia* has a steel plate in his head; suffers, like Ballantyne, from amnesia and war-shock; and is suspected of the murder of the hero's promiscuous wife).

Ballantyne's dream is as good a starting-point as any. In the narrative, the dream is treated as a decoratively esoteric version of 'reality,' a sort of allegoric distortion of the circumstances of the crime. Dr. Brulov, in response to Ballantyne's scepticism, compares dreams to jigsaw-puzzles with the pieces mixed-up; and it is the interpretation of the dream which reveals the location of the crime, precipitates Ballantyne's therapeutic re-enactment of the skiing trip, and finally reveals Dr. Murchison as the murderer. This use of the dream emphasises once more the suggested parallel of unsolved crime/forgotten trauma. Dream-analysis becomes the means by which the mystery of 'reality' is made intelligible: fitting together the pieces of the dream solves the patient and the crime.

The most striking thing about the dream as we are encouraged to read it is the remarkable absence of the personality of the dreamer. Apart from the sequence in which a voluptuous, scantily-dressed girl appears, kissing the players in the casino in turn, and identified by Ballantyne as Constance (a sequence which Brulov dismisses briefly and wearily as "plain, ordinary wishful-dreaming"), the dream-images are made to coincide point-for-point to 'real' events, as if they were empirical clues. The film purports to be an explication and justification of psychoanalysis, and yet the fundamental Freudian thesis that a dream represents the fulfillment of a wish is mentioned only to be dismissed as comparatively trivial, and replaced by an inverted version of the *pre*-Freudian thesis that dreams "could be used for practical purposes" (Freud's words)—here, not to foretell the mystery of the future, but to unravel the mystery of the past. Thus, if the proprietor of the casino is simply Dr. Murchison, there is no reason whatsoever, apart from considerations of narrative-suspense, why he should be masked in the dream, since Ballantyne has scarcely come in contact with him, and there is no necessity for his identity to be repressed.

I wish to suggest that the dream is an Oedipal dream, and that such a reading is supported by the whole presentation of the Constance-Ballantyne relationship. Ballantyne is playing cards with the bearded authority/father figure, identified for us as the 'real' Edwardes, but who bears a striking physical resemblance to Brulov, and might be a younger version of him. We should remember that the dream occurs in a drugged sleep which Brulov has induced (the drug concealed in the innocent whiteness of the milk—the color which terrified Ballantyne—and the deceit concealed by Brulov's paternal benignity), and which follows Ballantyne's suspended attempt on his life. The bearded figure defeats Ballantyne with blank cards, i.e. defeats him 'against reason'—his authority and victory are preordained, 'givens' of the game, and do not depend on the value of the cards he holds. The proprietor appears and threatens the 'father,' telling him "This is my place" and "You can't play here." He is masked because he is Ballantyne's surrogate in the dream—the son can express his hatred and jealousy through him, and deny it as his own emotion. We then see the father falling from the roof of the house—the wish for his death is fulfilled, the threat enacted. The masked figure appears from behind the chimney, carrying a wheel, which he drops onto the roof. The wheel suggests the vagina: with the death of the father, the mother is now sexually available to the dreamer. The camera tracks in on the hole in the hub of the wheel (a deeply suggestive image, given the use of doors and forward-tracks in the film). Suddenly, the screen fills with billowing smoke, and we then see Ballantyne fleeing down a slope pursued by the shadow of enormous wings:

seized by guilt and panic, the dreamer is unable to consummate the desired union with the mother, and flees from the achievement of his crime. The dream has begun with the image of an eye, and of a man cutting through eyes painted on drapery with a pair of shears, both suggesting the sexual wish on which the dream is based (recall the opening of *Un Chien Andalou*, in which, of course, Dali was also involved).

The link between the dream and Constance (which, once stated, is 'forgotten' in the narrative from thereon) is implied by Brulov himself. Constance is attempting to interpret the winged figure, and Brulov cuts in with, "The figure was you: If you grew wings you would be an angel." The implication of this seems to me fundamental to Hitchcock's presentation of the central relationship. Constance, the maternal, loyal, devoted woman, is also the potent woman, the woman with the phallus, the forbidden woman (the mother): like Miss Carmichael, Ballantyne simultaneously feels desire and denies it, and the series of hysterical breakdowns which he suffers throughout the film are all associated with moments of extreme sexual tension. This, and the fact that Ballantyne is appalled by a particular color, relates *Spellbound* emphatically to *Marnie*, and, more generally, to the recurrent characteristics of the developed erotic relationships in Hitchcock's films. The Cary Grant character in *Notorious*, for example, is based on a similar tension between desire and revulsion, and he tries to transform Alicia (Bergman) into a prostitute so that he can despise her for being one. The ambivalence is further explored in *Under Capricorn*, in Flusky's (Joseph Cotten) complex and vacillating response to his wife's degradation (Bergman once more).

I shall consider the crisis-points in *Spellbound* in their chronological narrative order.

(1) *The first meeting.* Constance and the other doctors are at dinner in the refectory, an empty chair (for Edwardes) separating Constance and Murchison, and suggesting the rupture which the newcomer will create, displacing Murchison professionally and sexually. They are discussing Edwardes. Constance says that she has read his work, and that "I intend to learn a great deal from Dr. Edwardes—I think we all can." Ballantyne comes in, and is introduced to Constance, Hitchcock cutting between close-ups of the two while the film's theme-tune wells up on the soundtrack—instant signifiers, as Truffaut remarks, of "love at first sight." The conversation turns to the value of sports as therapy for the patients, and Constance takes this up excitedly ("Dr. Murchison always said we never did enough in that direction"). Here, as in the interpretation of the dream (the descent into 'Angel Valley'), sport is given unmistakable sexual overtones. Fleuret describes Constance as "frustrated gymnast," and Constance agrees that she misses sports, "particularly winter-sports." She begins to tell Ballantyne about plans for building a swimming-pool ("an irregular one"), and outlines the proposed shape on the table-cloth with the prongs of her fork. Ballantyne is immediately alarmed, and over-reacts hysterically—"I presume that the supply of linen in this institution is inexhaustible!" Constance tries to gloss over the incident, and begins talking rapidly about how Ballantyne's behavior reminds her of Dr. Brulov, who couldn't endure the presence of a sauce-bottle on the table. Ballantyne sits smiling at her, at the same time trying to smooth out the fork-marks with his knife.

All the important elements are present in this first encounter: Ballantyne's initial attraction, the hint of Constance's repression, the sexual proposition (Constance tries to interest Ballantyne in sports), the association of Constance with the phallus (the fork, and, in addition, the knowledge—about the pool—which she has and he lacks), Ballantyne's perception of



her as threat and aggressor, and his hysterical withdrawal, followed by the attempt to erase the mark of her presence. We see also the link between Ballantyne and Brulov, and the common element of fastidiousness in their reactions, reinforced later by the similar dialogue given to both in praise of the *cleanness* of normality. This is important both in undermining the status of the analyst (his reaction is neurotic) and in respect of Constance—all the men perceive her as a threat.

(2) *The first embrace.* After fetching the book from the library, Constance at last summons up the courage to go into Ballantyne's room. He is asleep in a chair in the bedroom with a book in his lap, but wakes when she comes in; and Hitchcock cuts between them, separated by the frame of the door. Constance at first pretends awkwardly that she wants to discuss the book, but then abandons this—"I'm amazed at the subterfuge—I don't want to discuss it at all." Again, the blurring of the boundary between 'sane' and 'insane' is important here. Later, in the scene in which Edwardes' secretary appears, and the masquerade is uncovered, Murchison describes the imposter's deceit as "typical of the short-sighted cunning that goes with paranoid behavior." The immediate irony stems from the fact that the speaker himself is the murderer, and from his eminent clarity and clear-headedness (the note of scorn for 'mental illness' is also important, and ties in interestingly with Brulov's idealisation of 'normality'). One can also relate it to Constance's actions here, the fragile imposture breaking down under pressure. Significantly, she has removed her glasses; and throughout, the spectacles are associated with the scenes in which she is an 'analyst,' as opposed to the 'romantic' scenes. (She puts them on as a disguise in a moment of nervous tension when they are confronted with the two policemen in Brulov's parlour, removing them when the agents leave—an act which, ironically, gives her away to them later.) The whole scene, indeed, is treated, for Constance, as the 'unlocking of a door,' the discovery of her true self, the driving out of the demon of repression: "What a remarkable discovery that one isn't what one thought one was!"

She still attempts to resist the idea that they are in love—"It doesn't happen like that—in a day." Ballantyne, walking towards her, crosses the dividing threshold of the door. He is gazing at her with hypnotic fixity, while she stands motionless (spellbound)—and the image of the staring, controlling eye is central, most notably in the penultimate scene, where it becomes Constance's own: at the moment of her surrender, in the kiss, her eyes close, and we are given the superimposed vista of doors swinging slowly open.

Ballantyne's last line before the kiss is an insistence that they *are* in love: "It was like lightning *striking*. It *strikes* rarely." Afterwards, as he sees the black lines on her dressing-gown, he pushes her away, reassuring her that "it's not you," and muttering that "something *struck* me." Immediately, the 'phone rings, and Ballantyne is told that Mr. Garmes, Constance's patient of III (h), has "run amok," attempted to kill a guard, and then cut his own throat with a razor.

The narrative insists, clearly, that the breakdown is *not* a sexual crisis ("it's not you"), but the connotations are unmistakable. There is, first of all, the repetition of "strike," linking the embrace and the revulsion from it, and establishing the idea of assault. Most important is the extended symbolic parallel between Ballantyne and Garmes. As we have seen, they are introduced into the action almost simultaneously (IIIh) and linked by means of the paper-knife, the cutting-open of the mail/male becoming an attack on the unwanted newcomer and the patient (it releases his symptoms). Ballantyne believes he has killed his brother; Garmes believes he has killed his father—the Oedipal crime which underlies Ballan-

tyne's dream. The second meeting between Ballantyne and Constance takes place in Garmes' presence, and is precipitated by him, when Ballantyne rings her and asks for her help and advice with him, interrupting a conversation between her and Fleurot in which the latter is lying on the couch like a patient, revealing his ill-concealed jealousy of Constance's interest in Ballantyne. As Constance tries to explain to Garmes that his guilt is illusory ("a child's bad dream"), Hitchcock cuts away to a shot of Ballantyne watching with fascinated intensity (compare the cut-away to Constance when Miss Carmichael confesses that she "hates men"). When Constance returns late from her walk with Ballantyne, she is told that while they were away "Mr. Garmes became agitated again": and the walk has been characterised by the interplay of desire and repression, Constance insisting that love is a "delusion" invented by poets, and oblivious to Ballantyne's interest. The walk scene ends with Constance looking out over the landscape, *seeing* it for the first time, and declaring "Isn't this beautiful?"; while Ballantyne replies "Perfect," looking not at the country but at her, before distracting himself hastily with the picnic.

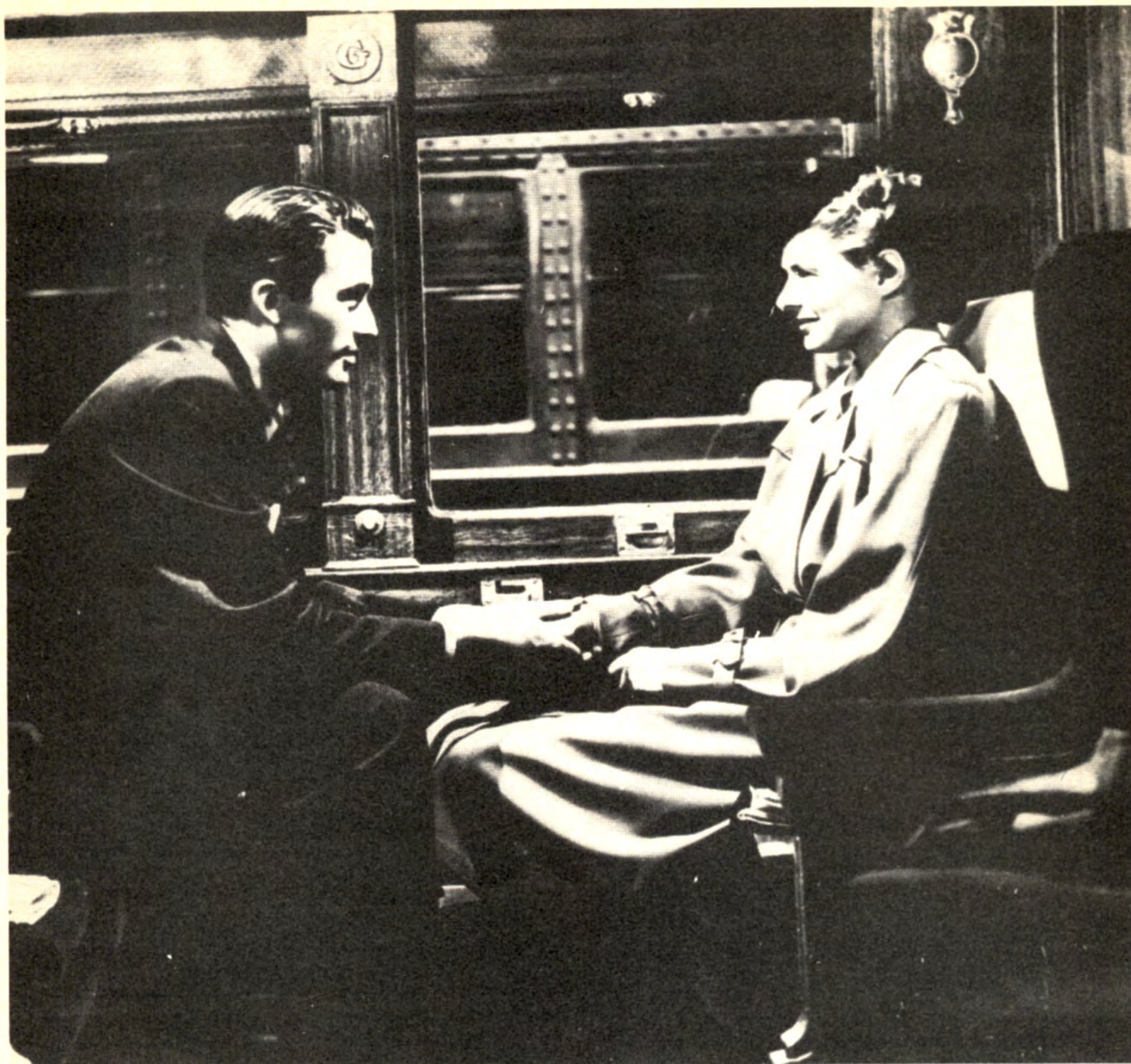
The Garmes/Ballantyne parallel reaches its crux in the scene of the embrace, and in the ensuing scene in the operating theatre, in which Ballantyne's breakdown becomes complete as he explicitly identifies himself with Garmes—"You can't keep people in cells! You fools babbling about guilt-complexes! What do you know about them?" The imagery of release which is so conspicuously insisted on (the doors; the books which both characters discard before the kiss) is radically subverted by the film's symbolic relationships.

(3) During the analytic session at the Empire State Hotel, Constance notices the burn on Ballantyne's arm. She grasps him by the wrist, demanding that he remember the accident. He tries to pull away from her, telling her she's hurting his arm. He becomes hysterical, and finally collapses when her grip is removed. Again, the scene up to that point has been marked by the alternate expression and denial of desire; Constance embraces him and is obviously alarmed when she thinks that he may be married, yet insists that "it has nothing to do with love." Similarly, Ballantyne's panic is juxtaposed with his assuring Constance that "Thank heaven I can't remember a wife."

(4) *The first train-journey.* Ballantyne remembers his accident in the plane over Rome, and responds to Constance's pressure with abuse, described metaphorically as blows in the dialogue.

(5) *The first night together.* Just as the couple first met in the house of Dr. Murchison, they spend their first night in the house of Dr. Brulov—under the aegis of the father. The desire/repression pattern here is crucial. Symbolically, it is the couple's wedding-night ("I take it this is your first honeymoon"). Alone, they can abandon their pretence (adopted for Brulov's benefit, and which, ironically, never deceives him); and, through Ballantyne's amnesia ("I can't remember ever having kissed any other woman before") and Constance's inexperience ("I have nothing to remember of that nature either") they seem for a moment the innocent, 'unfallen' couple. An ambiguity is introduced by Ballantyne's suggestion that they are "bundles of inhibitions" beneath which "dynamite" is buried. They embrace, but Constance pushes him off, insisting again that she is only his doctor, and that "the doctor occupies the couch—fully dressed," while the patient takes the bed. Immediately afterwards, Ballantyne notices the counterpane (white with embroidered white lines) and collapses. There follows the superb suspense set-piece, in which Ballantyne's anxiety is triggered by the whiteness of the bathroom, and he enters the somnambulistic trance in which he first tries





Analyst and patient: the train.

obsessively to shave himself, breaks off and approaches the sleeping Constance with the razor, and then goes downstairs where Brulov is waiting for him.

The phallic significance of the razor is confirmed by the shot in which Ballantyne descends the staircase, an unbroken take which begins with the figure in medium long shot at the top of the stairs, and ends in an enormous close-up of his hand, held rigidly at his side, the razor jutting out in front of him. The incident exactly mirrors the end of the first kissing scene, without, in this case, the mediation of Mr. Garmes: the same catalyst (sexual tension with Constance), the same weapon. Mr. Garmes turns on his guard; Ballantyne on Constance and then Brulov, both figures of potent, oppressive authority; and the actual procedure of shaving, which completes Ballantyne's discomfiture (shaving-brush stirring the lather in a cup), has clear erotic overtones. As in *Psycho*, sexuality is channelled into violence by the overwhelming force of repression—here, both partners' censorship of desire, and the presence of Brulov.

(6) *The train journey to Gabriel Valley*. They are in the restaurant-car, and Constance is having a meal. She says that in the future she intends to change her style of dress—"I've always loved very feminine clothes, but never quite dared to wear them." Ballantyne stares obsessively at her hands as the fork and knife cut the meat; and as Constance goes on, aware of his alarm, Hitchcock cuts to a close-up of his face, glazed with horror, grotesquely illuminated by the flashing lights of a passing train, the clatter of which thunders deafeningly on the soundtrack. The image blacks out.

The fork-and-knife imagery relates back both to the couple's first meeting and to the paper-knife scene, and relates the threat of Constance as the castrating woman to her desire to increase her 'femininity.' Ironically, her 'liberation' as a 'real' woman only augments the man's neurosis, defines its nature more clearly. In the previous train scene, the noise of a passing locomotive, and the reflection of its lights on Ballantyne's face, became, simultaneously the roar and glare of his flying accident. Now, the repetition of that imagery links economi-



cally the connotations of the various events involved—the 'accident,' Constance with a knife, femininity, the journey towards 'winter-sports' in Gabriel Valley.

(7) *The ski-run.* The connotations of winter-sports have already been described, and the descent of the slope on skis is clearly a sexual culmination for both Constance, "the frustrated gymnast," and for Ballantyne. The scene begins with Constance looming over him, ordering him sternly to put his skis on, and throughout the run, he is staring at her with the utmost repugnance and loathing. It is at this point that the ideologically compulsory resolution of the conflict (Ballantyne finds salvation through his relationship with Constance and remembers that he is 'not guilty,' the Oedipal trauma cancelled out) intrudes at the expense of the logic of the symbolism; as if Norman Bates were to be redeemed by Marion Crane as he tore aside the curtain of the shower. Hereafter, Constance's potency is not a problem for the hero or the narrative (Ballantyne, now 'cured,' can declare that his love is "beyond cure"), and it can be directed against the villain—as we have seen, Constance's gaze deprives Murchison of the use of his gun, and her use of her knowledge, which unmans Ballantyne, can become beneficial.

Such an interpretation helps to make sense of the connection between Murchison and Ballantyne created by the *mise-en-scène*: the repetition of the subjective tracking-shots towards the door before the love scene and the suicide scene, and the two ostentatious subjective trick-effects—Ballantyne drinking the drugged milk, and Murchison shooting himself. The threat to the hero of the woman and of her teacher/father,

Brulov, can be resolved when it is directed towards 'the monster'—the darker and more dangerous father-figure.

The film ends with the achievement of 'normality' and reconciliation, the exorcism of the "demons." Constance now accepts and invites the public kiss from which she shrank before ("We don't want to attract attention"), and the union is blessed by Brulov, who repeats an earlier remark that "Any husband of Constance is a husband of mine." Given the nature and role of fathers in the film, this is a deeply ambiguous suggestion—one might compare the end of *To Catch a Thief*, in which, in the last shot (also an embrace), Grace Kelly informs Cary Grant that mother will be coming to live with them. It should be noted, also, that Constance is still wearing a suit!

I have tried to indicate the ways in which a work designed, ostensibly, in praise of the science of 'normality,' continually subverts its surface-project. The way in which that subversion is achieved (the blurring of the 'normal' and the 'abnormal,' so that any definition of either becomes uncertain; the indication of insoluble conflicts in the main sexual relationship) suggests that Hitchcock's presence is a crucial factor in it. One can make no claim for *Spellbound* as an achieved work of art—the discrepancy between surface and implication, the grotesque uncertainty of tone (especially noticeable in the wildly clashing conventions of the acting) and the frequent banality of the script testifying only too clearly to Hitchcock's profound unease. The film's interest lies in the nature of its 'badness': in the tension between the affirmation and justification of fundamental ideological assumptions, and a repressed meaning which is everywhere at odds with them.

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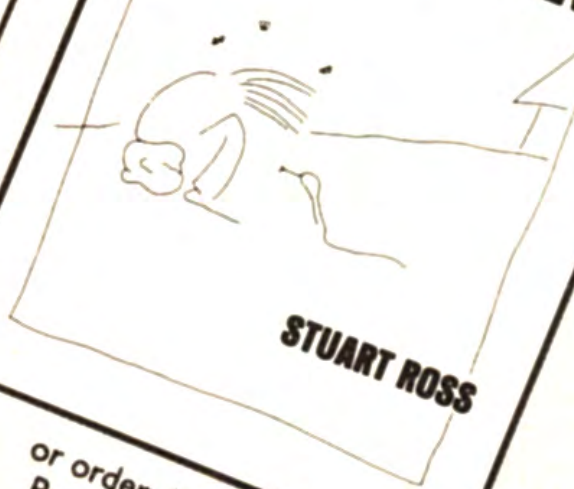
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*Celine and Julie Go Boating*: women and magic.

# Inventing Paradox: Celine and Julie Go Boating

by Janine Marchessault

Of what is great one must either be silent or speak with greatness. With greatness—that means cynically and with innocence.

(Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*)<sup>1</sup>

**G**ODARD'S CONTRIBUTION TO A RADICAL polemic around representation in the cinema is popularly celebrated. Certainly those practices which work to dislodge and challenge dominant patriarchal tenden-

cies within our culture owe a large debt to his pioneering anti-aesthetic in the late '60s and early '70s. However, it is within the context of the '80s that we must begin anew to assess the political effectivity of an anti-aesthetic—of works which are structured through a negative relation to dominant modes of representation. While Godard's post-1968 project attests to a kind of realism which comes under the aegis of Brecht, the 'anti-illusionist' aspect of the epic theater was meant as only the first step in the exploration of a social reality. For Brecht it was important to problematize the language of representation—to drain it of its illusory characteristics; but it was of equal importance to recuperate this language as a tool



for meaningful cognition. Unlike Brecht, Godard chose to remain entangled in the complex network of signification: the language of cinema. Godard understood that social realities were inextricably bound up in language, in the 'bourgeois concept of representation.' With this in mind, he developed deconstructive strategies based on a negativity which worked to uncover the historical underpinnings of the dominant discourse.

What many have chosen to see as Godard's failure—his inability to posit alternative modes of representation—was an inevitable extension of the antinomy underlying his nihilistic project: THE END OF CINEMA. Godard's 'j'accuse,' an economy of truth, only furthered his implication in the crime he set out to denounce: he was crushed by his own accusation. Radical nihilism, Nietzsche surmised, is "the conviction of an absolute untenability of existence when it comes to the highest values one recognizes; plus the realization that we lack the least right to posit a beyond."<sup>2</sup> This can only lead to a self-imposed censure. It is in respect of this censure that Godard's counter-cinema was an intervention, a negative assertion ("not a flowering": Barthes). But it is also this censure that condemns any practice as such to tautological recriminations. Through the logic of its trajectory, the negative speculation is locked into a relationship with the dominant discourse. The cinema which counters, which denounces by exposing 'falsehood,' is also the cinema which inadvertently serves as a complement to the dichotomy of domination.

This notion is implicit in *Theory of The Avant-Garde* where Peter Burger alleges that the avant-garde's predilection towards negativity anticipates its inevitable downfall.<sup>3</sup> In the face of the insurmountable monolith, the avant-garde will, in the end, opt for cultural suicide by negating its own emancipatory potential. Indeed, it is not uncommon to find couched amidst the pages of glossy art magazines, casual references to the 'end' of the avant-garde. Such speculations, it would seem, arise out of similar assumptions—that the avant-garde is one homogeneous movement.

It is precisely this sort of facile generalization which serves so well to maintain political and aesthetic borderlines. If it is to endure, the avant-garde must be that which resists historical fixtures; it must be that which is constituted not in one project but across several different and changing positions. Through this, radical practices might work to dissolve the borders erected to contain them and in the process vitiate them beyond 'recognition.' Godard attempted this erasure and yet was halted at the height of the interface: he refused the metamorphosis. Instead, his particular stratagem aimed to de(con)-struct capitalist mythologies (for destruction is always the 'sight' of a new beginning).

It is beyond this nihilism, however, beyond this destruction that, as Paul Ricoeur puts it, "the question is posed as to what thought, reason and even faith still signify."<sup>4</sup> While Godard was mounting his counterattack, other practices in France were attempting to work through this very question. Specifically, such ruminations can be detected in the films of Jacques Rivette, whose contributions seem all too often subject to oversight.

Rivette's work reflects in a large way the renewed interest in psychoanalysis and the overlapping concerns of feminism and semiotics. In this respect it is interesting that *Celine and Julie Go Boating*, made in 1974, coincides with Yvonne Rainer's *Film about A Women Who*, Chantal Akerman's *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* and Mulvey-Wollen's *Penthesilea* and shares with these works similar preoccupations around questions of language, representation and sexual difference—concerns which are primarily investigated through narrative modes. Within the avant-

garde, these practices tend to signal a move—in different directions—away from negativity towards an affirmative posture, offsetting a binary system which draws the line between the 'avant-garde' and the 'main-stream.'

It is this offsetting, this mixture of discourses which we find at the heart of *Celine and Julie*. If Godard set out to 'expose' the limits of representation, then Rivette penetrates those limits in an antigenetic fashion and turns them inside out. For this reason, *Celine and Julie* is a difficult film to write about; its transgressions come in the form of slippages and shifts, in the form of a writing which obviates classification, categorization—that is, in a form which resists analytical reduction. Nonetheless, the following discussion will attempt to grasp part of this complexity.

In order to establish a point of entry into this rather 'slippery' text, it will be useful to make a theoretical detour through the works of two writers: Sergei Eisenstein and Antonin Artaud, who each in his own (and yet strikingly similar) way, sought to create a new form of writing.<sup>5</sup> Both Eisenstein and Artaud worked towards erecting a language which was neither written nor spoken but constructed along the principles of a third variety of speech—a variation of which can be detected at work in *Celine and Julie*.

Upon reading *Ulysses*, Eisenstein was immediately struck by James Joyce's ability to collapse the subjective and the objective in a process of writing which took the form of interior monologue. Inner monologue, as a structuring principle, could find "full expression" in the cinema, for "only the sound film is capable of reconstructing all phases and all specifics of the course of thought."<sup>6</sup> Eisenstein compared the notion of 'affective logic' associated with spoken (as opposed to written) language, to cinematic montage which is regulated by similar laws. Through the analogy he discovers a third term:

... montage had to make further serious creative 'cruises' through the 'inner monologue' of Joyce, through the 'inner monologue' as understood in film, and through the so-called 'intellectual cinema,' before discovering that a fund of these laws can be found in a third variety of speech—not in written, nor in spoken speech, but in inner speech, where the effective structure functions in an even more full and pure form. But the formation of this inner speech is already inalienable from that which is enriched by sensual thinking.<sup>7</sup>

Eisenstein distinguishes the syntax of inner from outer speech: "How you talk 'to yourself' as distinct from 'out of yourself'."<sup>8</sup> Inner speech then implies the incorporation and the internalization of social discourse which, through this process, is subsequently broken down, condensed and abbreviated.

Eisenstein's exploration of the principles inherent in inner speech coincides with the work of the Formalist critic Boris Eikhenbaum who, in 1927, contended that the cinema did not simply escape the bias of words, but rather constituted their displacement in what he took to be the process of internal speech. Eikhenbaum maintained that theories of montage would have to be constructed to take into account the way in which the viewer 'reads' images: "He must continually form a chain of film-phrases or else he will not understand anything."<sup>9</sup> Eisenstein's concern is to transform this process of 'reading'—a logical and learned process—and restructure it as a sensual activity. Thus, his earlier project to induce abstract and ideological reasoning is forfeited to pure 'sensation':

Now the spectator's reaction must not be thought but pathos, 'ecstasy' . . . the very concept of montage is overhauled. Since the work of art must map the way we create felt concepts in life, montage's ability to render the



dynamic flow of images makes it the sovereign formal principle.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, Artaud, working in France in the early 1930s, was attempting to combat the dictatorship of words by positing a new practice—The Theater of Cruelty:

(Words) . . . by their very nature and defining character, fixed once and for all, arrest and paralyze thought instead of permitting it and fostering its development . . . I am adding another language to the spoken language, and I am trying to restore to the language of speech its old magic, its essential spellbinding power, for its mysterious possibilities have been forgotten . . . even the spoken and written portions (of the new spectacles) will be spoken and written in a new sense.<sup>11</sup>

Like Eisenstein, Artaud located this new language not in written or spoken speech but in a 'new sense' which would not inhibit thought but allow it to flow freely.

Artaud recognized that in order to produce a change in consciousness, language itself had to be uprooted and reformulated. This new language, Dionysian in character, would work to subvert that moment when signification imposes order on chaos. This process is not a negative inscription designed as deconstructive 'noise,' but an affirmative inflection capable of renewing the senses: "what is important is that, by positive means, the sensitivity is put in a state of deepened and keener perception."<sup>12</sup> In this way, Artaud envisions a language in constant movement, a flux which, as Barthes would put it, is always "ahead of itself,"<sup>13</sup> refusing the repetitive instance.

Both Eisenstein and Artaud were striving to formulate a new language derived from the Sensual. In light of this, it is interesting that they shared a fascination for dream work, for the relationship between words and images, and for 'secret' laws of the 'origin' which they felt could be discerned in ancient languages and primitive rituals. If Artaud was looking to find the 'dark truth of the mind,' then Eisenstein was attempting to translate into montage what he saw as the "prelogical." This "prelogical" configuration implied the construction of a space which would work independently from the social formation. As opposed to Brecht, who wanted to change social structures through concrete political action, Eisenstein and Artaud set out to change social structures by changing consciousness—by releasing it from the social strictures which lead to its domination. Their practices sought to affirm a new consciousness.

For their belief in some 'divine nature,' one that could be recaptured by returning language to its 'origin,' both Eisenstein and Artaud were accused of abandoning materialist (political) practices in favor of mysticism. However, I wish to argue that their practices and the principles inherent in their affirmations can be understood as materialist imperatives.<sup>14</sup>

Paul Willemen, whose work has served to bring about a renewed interest in the concept of inner speech, observes:

. . . internal speech (thought) can operate with extreme forms of abbreviation, condensations, image equivalents or fragments of image equivalents, extraordinary syntagmatic distortions, and so on. In fact, all the mechanisms which Freud detected to be at play in dream work can be seen at work in internal speech as well.<sup>15</sup>

The connection that Willemen makes between inner speech and dreams is significant for, as Freud maintained, the dream image can be understood as "grounded in folklore, popular myths, legends, linguistic idioms, proverbial wisdom and jokes." There is not, as Stephen Heath points out, much to distinguish inner speech from the notion of the Unconscious, derived from Lacanian psychoanalysis, as "the discourse of

the Other" which is "structured like a language."<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Willemen claims that inner speech is not to be understood as a realm of pure subjectivity but rather as an articulation which is 'lined' with the ideological, that is, grounded in the Social.

Thus, we find that this principle, used in accord with montage, can serve to reveal the foundations of epistemological/ideological practices: inner speech can reveal the materialist history of language.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, inner speech can disturb this history by positing heterogeneity—differences in articulation and emphasis.

The concept of inner speech has been used as an analogy for understanding the workings of various modes of articulation operative in the language of schizophrenics, primitives, children and in ancient languages.<sup>18</sup> That is, in all modes of discourse which postulate a slippage towards an origin: in the direction of the theater of cruelty. However, this slippage towards 'origin' can never be complete as it implies that there exists a position 'beyond' the ideological and therefore outside language.

Artaud's theatre of cruelty strove for this evasion—the pure unmediated experience. An experience which then could never be repeated, but which would constitute itself in eternal change. But as Derrida points out, herein lies its impossibility: repetition is always a necessary correlative to meaning (meaning is only posited through repetition). Artaud, however, was fully aware that this cruelty was impossible (which makes it all the more cruel),<sup>19</sup> yet he insisted on the contradiction; on a representation which could never be constructed outside the ideological but which would nonetheless attempt the impossible—"cynically and with innocence." In this attempt, it would not break away from, but would penetrate, ideological structures through the gaps and fissures in the complex social fabric.

We may locate the concept of inner speech as an operative tension in this paradigm, as a concrete tool which translates the impossible (origin) into the possible (language)—collapsing the subjective and the objective. This is an operation which does not reduce and fix signification to a hyper-centric closure, but posits new possibilities: the Affirmative Gesture.

In contrast to Burger's simplistic conception, we must not see language and social structures as monolithic, all-encompassing systems to be combatted with nihilistic grimaces. Rather, what must be examined are those practices which work as infectious incisions—stretching and penetrating the junctures between language and the social structures it is designed to accommodate. This is the discourse of cruelty, the discourse which endangers by transforming meaning, by increasing its own possibilities, by positing difference. Moreover, Barthes may be correct in his assertion that "in inventing a paradoxical (pure of any doxa) discourse: invention (and not provocation) is a revolutionary act."<sup>20</sup>

*Celine and Julie Go Boating* celebrates the occasion of just such a resistance. It is a text, which constructed along the principles of inner speech, decomposes and repossesses etymologies. It is a film which interrogates representation by perforating those very confines in which it is imprisoned. For this reason (in order to break loose), it is a film which manifests a rather contradictory mitosis: the Cinema and its Double. It is within this doubling that we discern part of the film's difficulty.

*Celine and Julie Go Boating* or *Phantom Ladies Over Paris* is credited with several signatures. It is constructed along a complex polyphony of interceptions, (re-)utterances and literary echoes; it is an intricate interpolation of tenses. Juliet Berto and Dominique Labourier developed the Celine and Julie



story, while Rivette is said to have been largely responsible for the puzzle-like montage of the fiction inside the House (which is based on two Henry James stories—"The Other House" and "A Romance of Certain Old Clothes"). The dispersion of authorial voices throughout the film is significant for these elements engage the text in a dialogical process which refuses the final mediation of one authority. This process implies, in the Barthesian sense, "the birth of the reader."

From the opening titles the film is split; even the phonetic symbols are marked by this difference. The double-barreled narrative, however, is a subterfuge of outward simplicity. Briefly: the film recounts the adventures of two women (Celine and Julie), who, having met by chance (magic), take turns entering a strange old house at 7-bis rue Nadir des Pommès. This house is peculiar for it is a dwelling plagued by repetition; a house in which the same story—a story of romance and murder—plays itself out, over and over, day after day. Yet it is a house which is oddly familiar—a house that we have all visited many times (but perhaps cannot remember): the House of Fiction.

The film's prismatic quality stems in part from the presence of literalisms, puns and metaphors, which are found in abundance, lodged in the crevasses of the text. These agencies serve as secret passages through which the author(s) may slip information (jokes, comments) to the spectator, unbeknownst to the characters in the text. Such devices (present in many of Godard's films as well) work to highlight the presence of the author(s) while providing an 'extra-textual' eruptive dimension to the film. Moreover, they extend the very notion of inner speech to the spectator, who must 'read' the film in order to decipher the messages.<sup>21</sup>

The most obvious of these eruptions can be located in the title itself: *Céline et Julie Vont en Bateau*. 'Monter en bateau' translates as a ruse: 'to string someone along.' This play is connected to the location of the House at 7-bis rue Nadir des Pommès: 'bis'/repeat (a representation); 'nadir'/lowest point (deep); 'pommès'/unconscious (in French, the expression 'tomber dans les pommès' means to fall unconscious). Thus we detect: representation (cinema) as a kind of deep hypnotic induction: Eve sunk to her 'nadir' in and through representation. This is supported by the absence of memory that the women experience after each 'immersion' in the House. It is only by sucking on 'magic candies' (which they mysteriously find in their mouths after their visits) that the narrative which they have enacted in the House, is 'secreted'—re-enacted—in fragmented condensations. Here again the play is obvious: candy (drug)/classical narrative as pleasurable passifier.

The women attempt to 'piece' together these episodes as one would the disjointed elements of a dream. In this dream (the House of Fiction) the players' mannerisms are the exaggerated gestures of a Victorian melodrama. Their punctilious articulations are delivered in monotones. The *mise-en-scène* is highly stylized; images are tightly composed, framed and contained. The colors inside the house are saturated and heavy, creating an atmosphere of suffocation; the bourgeois accoutrements are carefully ordered, everything in its place.

In direct contrast to this centripetal depiction, the Celine and Julie scenes are unpolished—rough, disordered and full of digressions, centrifugal. Their exchanges seem spontaneous and improvised; constructed along the principles of inner speech, these enunciations are lacunae of fragmented sentences, muffled giggles, riddles which are willfully indirect, pastiches of childhood memories, and telepathic imaginings. (In short, the stuff dreams are made of!) Theirs is a 'semiotic' engagement.<sup>22</sup> Their words disrupt the symbolic matrix so carefully maintained in the House of Fiction. Their discourse

is not dominated by one particular logic; a logic which would provide the locus for a fixed image of an identity, a custody in which Woman as dominated other is (re-)produced: a phallogocentric epistemology. Through their discourse, Celine and Julie avoid this consignment. They also evade the unifying instance through a series of bicorporeal splinterings.

The first of these bifurcations occurs in the opening scene as Julie sits on a park bench reading a book of magic. She reads an incantation aloud and covers her eyes. As she opens her fingers and peeks out, the camera cuts from a medium to a long shot of her. The cut is so abrupt that at first we are not aware that the scene has cut to a shot of the same person. Indeed, for a moment we believe that, from Julie's point of view, we are looking at someone else. This confusion is fundamental for it is at this moment that the split occurs, and not long after that Celine skirts across the park.

Thus, it would appear that Celine emerges from Julie as a kind of schizophrenic counterpart, capable of fulfilling her repressed desires. For it is Celine who leads Julie away from her job as librarian—away from the ordering, classifying and 'fixing' of meanings—back to the mystery of words. When Celine appears at the library where Julie works, she goes straight to the children's section (the child's entry into language) and begins disrupting the books. She traces her hand with a red marker in one of the books, defacing and defiling that which is fixed. At the same time in another room, Julie uses a red stamp pad to make fingermarks on a piece of paper. Here their telepathic bond is for the first time clearly articulated.

The red hand print is a motif which recurs throughout the film. Such a print materializes on both women after their excursions into the House; we see them attempting to wash the prints off, but it is a difficult process, a difficult spot to get at. Also, Camille, one of the characters inside the House, cuts her hand badly, and a red hand print stains the pillow which has been used to smother a little girl to death inside the House.

Interestingly, one of the first photographs produced in 1842 by William Henry Fox Talbot carried the trace of a hand: the Hand of the Photographer.<sup>23</sup> Herein lies the history of photographic representation: the fixing of an origin, the production of a copy. And in this trace, the truth of representation: the Male Hand. The hand which possesses, which produces, which frames and fixes (and distorts) meaning. This dispatch coincides with Artaud's 'cruelty' which is first and foremost the site of a murder—carried out by the hand that determines *logos*: "It is consciousness that gives to the exercise of every act of life its blood red color, its cruel nuance, since it is understood that life is always someone's death."<sup>24</sup> Thus, the hand which leaves its mark—severs the origin—is a violent fission. Celine and Julie are branded by this hand; the act is cruel, a violation. It is the indexical stamp—the ideological markings—of a patriarchal society, imposed on the women through the agency of the House of Fiction.

Camille cuts her hand on a glass at the very moment when she is mistaken for the dead sister whom she so closely resembles. But as she tells the Nurse (Miss Terry), she was never as good as her sister, could never quite 'live up' to her. She can wear her sister's clothes but she can never replace her; she will always be only a shadow, a trace. A woman in search of her identity: a bleeding hand.

The child (the only element that is not 'fixed' in the House) is very sick and is finally smothered by this Hand: a hand which suffocates—freezes—the seeds of growth. But the child is not sick at all! She is being poisoned by candies (drug/poison/classical narrative) given to her by her governess, a woman who manifests a severe psychological aversion to





Juliet Berto.

flowers (the 'origin' of life). The father in the House of Fiction is, of course, the originator of this violent trace, for it is his hand that exercises control over the House: the Hand of God.

Nonetheless, it is this hand which Celine and Julie successfully 'wash off'—erase. In its place, their hands, their representations—as, in the library, Celine goes to the children's books (the origin of writing) and disfigures the text, leaving her trace (her hand), and by extension Julie does the same. Moreover, Celine and Julie protect each other from the forces of domination by acting as stand-ins for one another. (The doubling is obscured, there is no 'origin'; thus they again refuse the fixed identity.) For it is Celine who arrives in Julie's place to meet with Julie's fiancé. It is Celine who ruins Julie's chances for marriage, or rather, who rescues her from an identity constructed by male desire: the Virgin Bride. Conversely, it is Julie who arrives in Celine's place for an audition. It is Julie who ruins Celine's chances for an international tour or rather, who rescues her from an identity constructed by male desire: the Burlesque Performer—the Whore.

As Gérard de Nerval wrote: "In every man there is a spectator and an actor, the man who speaks and the man who answers."<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Celine and Julie are compounds of this

contradiction (a principle of inner speech: 'to address oneself as if to another'), acting both as spectators of, and actors in, the interior fiction. As actors, their engagement occurs, for the most part, in the past tense as memory (in representation, the enactment has always already occurred). As spectators, they embrace the present—a position (sitting together, facing the camera as if it were a screen, predicting the outcome of the plot) which mirrors our own. In this reflection—a refraction—the 'unifying instance' of the cinema is undone. However, this deflection does not work to separate, but to include: the hidden spectatorial zone is unsealed from any notion of textual unity, and is introduced as another circuit in the specular labyrinth. A purely Artaudian construct!

Artaud criticized the notion of alienation and the Epic theater because it simply attempted to "cast the mind into an attitude distinct from force but addicted to exultation." Instead, he attempted to propel the viewer into the centre of the spectacle where

distance of vision is no longer pure, cannot be abstracted from the totality of the sensory milieu; the infused spectator can no longer constitute this spectacle and provide



himself with its object. There is no spectator or spectacle, but festival.<sup>26</sup>

In Godard's hands, the device of mirroring subject position would have been used to 'demystify' and deconstruct the illusory aspects of the cinematic surface. In *Celine and Julie* this device carries with it quite a different effect. It serves in a sense to affirm the cinematic surface not as a reflection of reality, but as a different form of reality. It is, like the concept of inner speech, 'lined' with the ideological (House) which it breaks down and transforms into a new discourse.

*Celine and Julie* asks us to confront a different system; it invites us to delight in the pleasures of the mystery, to partake in a 'festival' which leaves us free to wonder, to wander, to come and go, to get caught up, to imagine, to read the film as one would a dream. And like a dream, time is suspended—the film extends itself over 3¼ hours. It simply ignores ("cynically and with innocence") the standard 90 minutes dictated by the capitalist system, which compartmentalizes production and consumption into carefully ordered time slots. This alternation, however, does not oppose pleasure to work: the duration of the film is not a tedious device aimed at self-reflexivity but simply emphasizes that time is of no consequence in this world.

And in this world, Celine and Julie realize that an intervention is in order: they decide to rescue the child who is being repeatedly poisoned and suffocated. To do this, they must break up the oppressive order inside the House. Thus, the schizophrenic counterparts come together in the role of the Nurse: the Nurse who heals the bleeding hand (in search of an identity) and who embodies the contradiction—Celine and Julie as spectators/Celine and Julie as actors playing a role. The contradiction she inhabits of inner speech. As Artaud writes: "This word 'double' also refers to the great magical factor, the forms of theatre are no more than a figuration of it, waiting for it to become the transfiguration."<sup>27</sup> And yet, Miss Terry exists—not in being but in 'becoming,' as a representation which is unstable. She is perhaps the real mystery embedded in the fiction.

Celine and Julie's presence in the House instigates its deterioration. Like an old film that has played too often, the inhabitants of the House (with their grey faces and their torpid gestures) become entangled in the reels of their own discordant projections. With this erosion, the child is saved. She is the seed sown from the House of Fiction, transplanted into the new fiction; a metamorphosis free to change and to grow (and to go boating!)—and to create new fictions.

The author(s) are careful, however, not to let this reconciliation get too carried away, to mistake itself for something it is not; after all, this is a film destined to repeat itself: but to repeat itself differently (depending on who is watching). And so, once more the doubling—the textual re-fracture: we begin again, but with a slight shift in emphasis, a differential thrust, a minute twist, a contradiction—it is now Celine who appears sitting on a park bench.

It is this contradiction and this confusion which are the necessary challenges to an imminent pathology; the very terms of the debate are always already inhabited by the Symbolic order: the Law of the Father. These challenges, the effects of the double, operate the frustration of this Order by disorienting it, turning it upside down, and redefine the limits of its reason. But, as Peter Wollen cautions,

... any redefinition can only be partial and unstable, any definition complicitous and fetishistic to a certain degree. Hence a cinema that sets out to investigate sexual difference is caught in a dilemma. It must overthrow an Order, a system of representations, that still provides its own condi-

tions of possibility. It must be a cinema founded on ambivalence and irony, the montage of discourses, mobility of identity, and openness of inquiry. In a sense, it is fated to be a hysterical cinema, always speaking from a place it knows it is not and occupying a place from which it knows it cannot yet speak.<sup>28</sup>

And yet it does speak. This is the paradox of language: while Eisenstein and Artaud were never fully able to realize their different projects because they could never quite locate the 'origin,' Rivette avoids this impasse and simply invents a 'magic.' This invention is a display of the Imaginary, of the powers of the imagination: to imagine difference, and differently.

For as Marx suggested, what differentiates "the worst architect from the best of bees (in the construction of her cells) is that the architect erects his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality." It is by means of this conceptual distinction that Marx accounts for change. It is also as a result of this complex (and sometimes tentative) particularity that we may at least hope for 'heterology.' Like Miss Terry, the mystery of fiction—of history—is that it is (inter-)changeable. The 'magic' enables Celine and Julie to walk into the past and rearrange it; to unfreeze that which is imprisoned within the House (the child); to posit a new origin (Celine instead of Julie) and to start again, like a stream of fragmented thoughts which refuse arrest.

## NOTES

1. F.W. Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann, Vintage Books, 1968, p. 3.
2. Ibid, p. 9.
3. Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, University of Minnesota Press, 1984. See Jochen Schulte-Sasse's foreword for a discussion of this aspect.
4. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, trans. Denis Savage, Yale University Press, 1970, p. 33.
5. In comparing their projects, I do not wish to ignore the specificity inherent in their different endeavors.
6. Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form and the Film Sense*, The World Publishing Company, 1968, p. 105.
7. Ibid, pp. 250-51.
8. Ibid, p. 105.
9. Boris Eikhenbaum, "Problems in Film Stylistics," *Screen*, Vol. 15, No. 4, 1974-75, p. 13-14.
10. Quoted in: David Bordwell, "Eisenstein's Epistemological Shift," *Screen*, Vol. 15, No. 4, 1974-75, p. 41.
11. Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards, Grove Press, 1958, p. 111.
12. Ibid, p. 91.
13. See Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975, p. 40ff.
14. In "Eisenstein's Epistemological Shift" (Op.Cit.), David Bordwell suggests that Eisenstein's preoccupation with inner speech—which signalled a return to the subject—constituted a break away from his earlier materialist formulations of intellectual montage. Bordwell attributes this shift to the political con-





The two Miss-Terries.

text of the early 1930s in Russia, that is, to the abolition of the materialist cinema and the new-found allegiance to Socialist Realism. However, Gregory Ulmer in *Applied Grammatology* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985, p. 288) argues that the shift does not imply an abandonment of his earlier formulations but can be seen in fact as an extension of those theoretical experiments. Ulmer points out that Eisenstein's dissatisfaction with the 'intellectual cinema' came with the poor reception accorded *October*. Moreover, this shift in emphasis occurred prior to 1930.

15. Paul Willemen, "Cinematic Discourse—The Problem of Inner Speech," *Screen*, Vol. 22, No. 3, 1981, p. 61.
16. Cf. Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema*, Indiana University Press, 1980, p. 204.
17. Cf. *Ibid*, p. 243.
18. Ulmer, *Op. Cit.*, p. 291.
19. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, The University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. 247.
20. Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, trans. Richard Miller, Hill and Wang, 1976, p. 126.
21. There is a similarity here with Eisenstein's project that would merit further investigation. Rivette's work, like Eisenstein's, is 'highly written'—to be explored further might be the presence of puns and metaphors, as well as the way Celine and Julie's dialogue (monologue) is structured into the text, and how this

works with the images. The use of these elements, as in Eisenstein, serves to create and disrupt meanings. (For example, there is one instance in which Julie addresses Celine as "Monsieur"—a negative inversion which posits another possibility: Celine is a man?)

22. Julia Kristeva analyzes the process of meaning production through language; she associates the 'unifying instance' in language—the dominance of the 'symbolic' over the 'semiotic'—with the dominance and perpetuation of patriarchal systems. See her "Signifying Practice and Mode of Production," *Edinburgh 1976 Magazine*, 1976, p. 68ff.
23. For illustration, see Gail Buckland, *Fox Talbot and the Invention of Photography*. Buckland took this early calotype to a palmist in order to uncover the hidden personality traits behind the hand of the photographer.
24. Artaud, *Op cit.*, p. 102.
25. Quoted in Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Cornell University Press, 1980, p. 116.
26. Quoted in Derrida, *Op. Cit.*, p. 244.
27. Artaud, *Op. Cit.*, p. 16.
28. Peter Wollen, "Counter-Cinema and Sexual Difference," *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*, New Museum of Contemporary Art 1985, p. 39.



# Capital at Play: Form in Popular Film

by Scott Forsyth

Want to go to the Movies?

**W**E ALL KNOW WHERE WE go when we go to the movies, don't we? However, familiar as the phrase is, its implications are difficult to specify—a confluence of a place, a line-up, a crowd, a particular expenditure of time and money, certain foods, 'expected' images, stories, pleasures, a screen and darkness filled by light. It is our 'choice,' but deeply organized: and we go to a singular movie (our purchase proves that, doesn't it?) with a firm sense of plurality—the MOVIES.

One of the obvious characteristics of Hollywood in the last decade has been the string of mega-hits—blockbusters—with their continually rising 'record' grosses. They seem to be emblematic of 'going to the movies.' Though relatively small in number, the blockbusters stand out: it is common to define contemporary Hollywood by the films of Lucas and Spielberg—*Star Wars*, *Close Encounters*

of the *Third Kind*, *E.T.*—or by such series as *Superman*, *Rocky*, or the Rambo films. There is a temptation to see this as a distinctive development; the producer Robert Evans (*The Godfather*, *Cotton Club*) remarked recently that he was a practitioner in the *newest* art form—the blockbuster. Clearly, this isn't quite true. Indeed, Hollywood's typical form, the feature film, was at inception a blockbuster. It had to win its dominance over shorter forms (cartoons, serials, two-reelers) and competing entertainments (vaudeville). Even after the subsequent stratification of feature production into hierarchies of 'quality' and genre, Hollywood has been identified with blockbusters for 80 years: the films of Griffith, DeMille's Biblical epics, *Gone With The Wind*, wide-screen spectacles of the '50s, the 'disaster' cycle of the '70s. We could also describe a relatively stable set of characteristics associated with such films: 'unprecedented' budgets and major stars (actors, directors and producers); emphasis on production value and scale (huge casts, historical 'accu-

racy,' special effects); extensive promotional campaigns which highlight these characteristics and all aspects of the production (star searches, scandals, even the sets themselves); elaborate advertising and distribution strategies. From conception, a blockbuster is organized to be a hit.

Most of the films I've mentioned *are* major hits, with considerable fan dedication, even multiple viewing. The apex of this organization is obviously a successful exchange: fans, their expectations finely prepared, approve of the fulfillment of those expectations. Both colloquial and critical opinion may dismiss that fulfillment as 'just entertainment'; but ears tuned to the psychoanalytic will recognize the presence of something more in that evasive 'just.' Because of course there is something more. The blockbuster promises an excess of entertainment, that the sum of its parts will be a spectacle distinct from all other movies or media, one movie that can stand in for all the movies. One guarantee that the audience has about this exchange is that



*Gremlins*: star/monster/comedian, bad teen/movie spectator/toy/marketing symbol—the heterogeneous circulation of the aesthetic commodity.



the rhetorics of entertainment and business are entwined: we understand the film as a capital investment because failure is as crucial to the rhetoric as success. The film is presented as a gamble despite its elaborate organization: the tautology that a hit is a hit because it's announced as a hit doesn't always work. The rhetoric can switch easily from genius to hubris, glamor to waste: disastrous scandal and failure haunt the lineage (*Intolerance*, *Cleopatra*, *Hello Dolly*, *Heaven's Gate*, 1941, *Dune*, etc.) Superficially, this foregrounds the audience as a market, with a kind of visceral power. More importantly, it places the kind of spectacle offered as specifically 'mass': the word 'blockbuster' implies the production of a spectacle *and* thronging crowds; it inscribes an experience which is collective, within film's lineage in 19th century theatricality—it is the mass medium viewed in a mass. The point can be emphasized by contrasting the bantering, cheering audience of a blockbuster with the silent reverence of the 'art' film audience: the former literalizes the 'dialogue' of film and spectator, emphasizing collectivity; the latter internalizes that dialogue into solitary contemplation and the crowd disappears; the music hall vs. the church or library, with their attendant class and generational distinctions.

In effect, blockbusters, though small in proportion of total production, have always been the paradigm *in extremis* of Hollywood production, all of which convolutes the commercial and the aesthetic, and places the collective of the audience in an apparently privileged foreground. Even the generic features of blockbusters tend to operate like other genre films; to offer a comprehensive 'world' (usually in an explicitly Utopian sense) with rules and conventions recognizable to fans/connoisseurs. At the same time, the blockbuster needs cross-generic appeal and tends to combine genres—the romance with the war film, family melodrama with fantasy, science fiction with private eye or western or fairy tale (*Reds*, *E.T.*, *Blade Runner*, *Star Wars*). Nonetheless, if the appeal of such a film is first to the coherence or integrity of its 'world,' the blockbuster includes a conscious emphasis on the 'extra-filmic' for our appreciation of that world: in a way, blockbusters constitute a genre unto themselves.

Some of the apparent prominence of recent blockbusters can be traced to the overall conditions of Hollywood production. Blockbusters attempt to recapture some of the reliability of a cohesive integration amongst production, distri-



bution, exhibition and consumption threatened by the decline of the classic studio system, the anti-trust loss of theatre chains, the threat of audience loss to other media. (One of the intentions of an 'excess' of spectacle is to indicate 'not television'.) Amidst declining production and audiences, massive commitment to these few films can reverse attendance figures for a whole year (obviously locking the theatre chains to the producers), or destroy a studio. In a sense, blockbuster production since the '50s has allowed a re-constitution of the studio system (even if only for one film at a time): this is the clear ambition of the key auteur/producers—Lucas, Spielberg, Coppola.

The blockbuster is Hollywood defiantly announcing its mass spectacle/commodity, apparently unitary and consumable. Blockbusters seem very much like other such spectacles as rock concerts or sports contests: the crowd as collective is emphasized with a place for spontaneous enthusiasm and ritualized participation; readily comprehensible and linear narratives (though all requiring prior knowledge and ranging up to the density of the *Star Wars* plots or the combination of rules, statistics and 'live' options which make sports so much a connoisseur's pleasure—neatly illustrating the tendency for media narrative to collapse the distinction between dramatization and documentation, 'real' and 'staged'); structures of successive tableaux, mise-en-scène of considerable visual complexity;<sup>1</sup> narrative and mise-en-scène generating both fulfilled expectation and surprise.

Perhaps because of their 'obviousness' such spectacles are dismissed but I would like to bracket our evaluative and prescriptive reflexes and look more closely.

"We ain't afraid of no . . ."

**G**HOSTBUSTERS, RIGHT from its exemplary rhyme, is clearly a blockbuster: big stars, big budget, the most successful comedy ever filmed. However, as soon as we try to document the experience of spectacle, this film seems rapidly to disperse all over the place. I may have heard the hit song on radio or seen the music video on TV prior to the film. I saw the ad logo in newspapers and on billboards before knowing the title of the film. I see video games, T-shirts, toys based on the film. Gag lines from the film enter the popular idiom, as with any successful ad campaign or TV sitcom. The film as commodity apparently fragments into and across various media and diverse entertainment industries. I may even have seen the film on videocassette, directly contradicting the importance of the spectacular and the collective, or indicating perhaps that our comprehension of the spectacle is so over-determined that its consumption can be rhetorical rather than literal.

At one level, this diversified commodity organization reflects the state of corporate conglomeration across the media and entertainment industries. Ideally, the huge corporations behind blockbusters want a horizontal integration to match the vertical integration of the studio model: revenues from soundtrack, video games, toys, videocassettes can all be confidently projected. The film is only part of a constellation of marketing and products with an intensified capacity for exploitation. The point is illustrated neatly in *Ghostbusters* in a rapidly edited sequence to the title song which we recognize as a video (i.e. separable from the film), and which turns out to be an



advertisement for the ghostbusters company in the middle of a news report about them; their logo is the logo we recognize from the film's advertisements. Marketing and 'art' intersect and cross media: we're used to films about films, and at this point *Ghostbusters* seems to be a film about its own promotion.

This commodification within the commodity may be intensifying in Hollywood films although it may not be their most significant feature. *Ghostbusters* is organized as a chain of special effects sequences, each an increasingly impressive display of lighting, explosives, animation, make-up, which represent ghostly and monstrous transformation and destruction. In between, the narrative progression is deliberately, jokingly irrelevant, almost time-filling, and though we can see that familiar anxieties about female sexuality or nuclear apocalypse generate the pyrotechnics, it is evident that the sequences are also generated for their own sakes.

'Special effects' is one of those intriguing phrases in film language that seems to express an ambivalence about the ideologies of representation and production in dominant film. It is a crude version of those endeavors to define film ontologically, like versions of film history which place Lumière and Méliès as 'essences' rather than as practices; it implies a regular or natural film process from which the special effects are marked off, of which they are perhaps

even a violation (this is especially the promotional rhetoric of smaller-budget social realist films). Indeed, the special effects sequence does *stop* the film: it marks a qualitative change in the film and its reception, a moment we can isolate as having exactly the location and status of the 'number' in a musical which, of course, has been critically remarked as a disturbance in classical narrative—as they say in musicals, a 'show-stopper.' Blockbusters are more and more structured like musicals: repetitive monstrous murders or transformations, car chases, battle sequences, fights, even musical numbers are organized along the narrative chain, all requiring particular choreography and techniques. Different generic genealogies could probably be traced: for westerns and gangster films, the slow-motion and blood-bags of *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Wild Bunch* or *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* mark an intensification of such a structure; horror films endlessly repeat Marion Crane's shower; kung-fu and revenge films work variations. Notwithstanding genre differences or increasingly violent representation, such sequences take on the elaborate combination of playfulness, art and distance we associate with the musical number. (Somehow it makes me feel better to think that *Rambo* is basically a musical.)

To signal the intensification that such sequences bring for us in the audience, we lift them out of the film: "the movie was OK but the special effects were

great!" Usually we hail them in a way that combines the main ideologies of dominant film practice—the teleologies of 'realism' and technological refinement: image plus color plus Dolby plus wide-screen plus blood-bags equals "those fights were really realistic!" The language is like a grade for the production of effect—realistic artifice; we're happy to believe *and* dis-believe because the parameters of 'illusion' and 'real' have both been constructed before us.

Indeed, if the narrative is 'stopped,' such a moment lets us consider filmic production as just the 'application' of technology; 'labor' is effaced or returns stylized as the sweaty play of dancing and fighting actors or the interest in the 'craft' of special effects (e.g. the promotional documentaries on 'the making of . . . ' many recent blockbusters). Finally, if our preparation through promotion has been typical, we further equate the intensification with the intensification of capital investment. Considering how special effects deploys so much of the unique expressive potential of film, its 'art,' our responses tend to evade the artistic. Thus, while such sequences follow traditional aesthetic injunctions to astonish or delight, even colloquial responses show a certain 'embodiment' of key bourgeois ideologies: magical production, capital as free-floating money, invisible relations of production. From this angle, the special effects number can stand as a paradigmatic 'product' of contemporary capitalism: a



Murray and Ackroyd in *Ghostbusters*: stars as ironic spectators.



spectacular entwining of images and technology for a notably ephemeral mass consumption.

Similarly, psychoanalytic criticism has emphasized the overlapping of the fetishistic and voyeuristic in film spectatorship; such sequences, however, indicate a pre-eminence of fetishism, which is characterized in psychoanalysis as simultaneous belief *and* repudiation. The image's technological ingenuity and visual complexity suggest the plenitude for which the 'object' must stand in. Indeed, the typical 'explosiveness' of the sequence (an organized *jouissance*, *pace* Barthes?) suggests a broader utopian dimension in the resolving or evading of narrative dilemmas: in the over-filling of the screen and our senses; in the way 'spectacular' products carry our desires; in the 'transformations' enacted or implied.

So, the blockbuster seems to be dispersing into commodities and across media: even at its most cinematically impressive, it fragments what we have understood as dominant narrative. Before it disappears into the image-sated 'everyday' of 'consumer capitalism,' there are a few other formal features of contemporary film worth noting.

Isn't anyone serious anymore?

**I** WANT TO MAKE TWO FINAL points: that the blockbusters (and most Hollywood productions) employ the inter-textual operation we call parody, and that they not only foreground audiences (their production,

their pleasure, their collectivity), but they also inscribe the audience in the film in some important ways.

We're used to thinking of many modern Hollywood directors as self-conscious in their knowledge of previous films and styles, in their presentation of their own product, their own style. We may make authorial distinctions within a sort of hierarchy of seriousness: Scorsese and Altman 'deconstruct' genres or make 'art' films; DePalma 'imitates' Hitchcock; Lucas or Spielberg invoke every cartoon or serial they've ever seen, etc. Nonetheless, they all re-work previous works into more or less integrated new works. In a way, this is Hollywood's nostalgia for itself; that pervasive ideological operation which digests History as pre-text for a perpetual present—perhaps the media's most *political*, if indeterminate, 'effect.' Hollywood recaptures its past which, of course, 'invented' going to the movies, with the audience's knowledge of the inter-relationship of a movie with the repetitions and variations, in and between genres, of *all* movies. In other words, an enormous emphasis is placed on audience interpretation despite the sense of recuperation that nostalgia also carries.

Umberto Eco makes a somewhat similar point in arguing that 'cult' classics depend on the 'detachability' of parts of the film—dialogue, star turns, repetitive genre conventions—which can then circulate amongst the audience as indicators of connoisseur comprehension.

Eventually a cult depends on such a process embodying 'going to the movies.' Eco implies that cult films have now moved into the mainstream<sup>2</sup>; less pejoratively, I would say that various kinds of parody (and perhaps pastiche) dominate.<sup>3</sup>

We understand the operation of parody in *Ghostbusters* primarily through characterization, especially Bill Murray's. Despite the flamboyance of the film's special effects, virtually all such moments are deflected (deflated) by an ironic comment or gesture. Murray uses his TV comic persona to look askance at the genre and its production, and directly addressed (from 'outside' his film character), the audience collectively become ironic spectators. The typical conception of identification, character and narrative is disrupted in favor of a kind of flattery of the audience. This is, in a sense, complementary to the special effects which clearly encourage a self-referential distance from their production and consumption.

Frequently we understand the use of parody across films and media at the level of intention as simply influence (as in various laments about the pernicious influence of television) or quotation and *hommage*. However, many films make little sense unless we are aware of the synthesis of 'texts' taking place. For instance, the hit musical *Purple Rain* is a chain of musical numbers which are detachable as videos, but if we don't watch the rest of the film narrative as essentially an extended video we will probably mis-



Weaver and Moranis in *Ghostbusters*: ridiculed sexuality as a post-climax deflation of the special effects sequence.



recognize the extreme stylization of the melodrama, an acting style dominated by poses and gestures, dialogue which is in effect spoken lyrics and which defers to visual imagery. Similarly, we need to 'know' the Keystone Kops, the Roadrunner and a TV show to watch *The Blues Brothers*, Disney cartoons to watch *E.T.*, all of television 'culture' for *PeeWee's Big Adventure*: the tendency is for parody to synthesize across the media.

A brief comparison between two recent small-town horror films, *Gremlins* and *Ghost Story*, indicates how parody dominates contemporary Hollywood filmmaking. *Ghost Story*, in its promotion, invoked a sense of Hollywood tradition, and, in most ways, fulfilled that expectation. It takes seriously the metaphorical implications of small-town horror. The town is represented in a realist mode and normalcy is discovered to be based on murderous secrets: Patriarchy represses female sexuality and produces the monster which threatens it. The monstrous appearances are designed to shock and imply, ambiguously, a generative source in the tensions of the 'normal' characters. Clearly, this is a 'progressive' film in its critique of Patriarchy; just as clearly, our identification with a surviving character allows a kind of absolution from the critique. An interesting and intelligent film which flopped.

*Gremlins* fits the model of blockbuster I have discussed. It is organized around a series of impressive special effects sequences; its heroes *are* its monsters and are the main ancillary product. The generic features of small-town melodrama are taken as subjects for parody: we seem to be in a version of a Disney or Capra small-town and suddenly we are watching characters watching *It's A Wonderful Life* on TV—the 'Capraesque' is remodelled and nightmarishly disrupted with considerable glee. This may imply that any invocation of small-town America makes no sense in contemporary terms, or it may mean that the inter-textuality doubles back on itself as continual media surface, refusing the metaphor *Ghost Story*, with its classic generic self-consciousness, pursues. For *Gremlins*, beneath the comic banality of the normal is just the comic banality of horror: the monsters are just bad 'teenagers' and are cleverly inscribed as a rambunctious movie audience. The 'monstrous' is cinematically produced, generated by the diffuse rebelliousness of the audience against various levels of 'authority'; a family melodrama is simply registered and resolved in a sentimental anti-climax. By contrast then, the obviousness of *Ghost Story's* ideological text may indicate a certain superses-

sion of the paradigm Patriarchy/repression/dangerous sexuality. *Gremlins* integrates the pleasures of the blockbuster with a parody of media representation and an invocation of the unleashed hedonism of the consumer society: not surprisingly, it counts amongst the mega-hits of the '80s.

It should also be possible to differentiate amongst parodies. For instance, both Stallone and Schwarzenegger, as stars and characters, embody an extreme assemblage of 'masculine' ideology and imagery; some of their films specifically incorporate favored Reaganite themes (although who is parodying whom becomes rather a moot point). However, only Schwarzenegger has had the drollery to follow the logic of the 'masculine' and play a monster in *The Terminator*, which has some of the exhilarating destructiveness of *Gremlins*.

Of course, parody doesn't have to involve wit. Teen series like *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, *Porky's*, *Animal House* function like 'B' blockbusters in the organization and inscription of their audiences and in their display of repetitive murders or pranks. They are something like cumulative parodies: as sequels multiply, an initial self-consciousness of movie style (familiarity with Hitchcock, silent comedy, the Three Stooges, etc.) is subsumed within an increasingly obvious 'quotation' of the previous film(s) and the audience's expected response.

The crowd has always been present in blockbusters: as milling extras, as the dead on battlefields; repetitively in the teenage collective heroes of many recent films. The resonance between this inscription and parody is to impart an element of *activity* to the collective whose 'knowledge' suggestively produces the spectacle, within the apparent *passivity* of consumption.

### Watching Capitalism, Looking for History

**O**BVIOUSLY, BY UTILIZING the buzz-words of modernist practice and criticism—inter-textuality and self-referentiality—I'm indicating that the tendency of mainstream film is formally to extinguish some of the distance between 'serious' culture and 'mass' culture. I think one could argue that modernism and mass culture arose, twinned, in the midst of capitalist modernity's factories, free market and cityscape; and that both affronted traditional aesthetics of harmony, beauty, completion, aura, with varying orders of (and responses to) dis-

ruption, fragmentation, and commodification. Looking almost as far back, we can see that film has always been articulated in the midst of other media, other amusements; has always tended to organize a chain of spectacles. There is a tendency to perceive a review of the contemporary moment as a periodization rather than as part of a process (every moment is trivially historicized in media rhetoric; constantly a new phase, trend, movement or more grandly, part of a new order—post-industrial, post-feminist, etc.) but perhaps there are some points about contemporary politics and aesthetics which can be drawn from the formal issues I've described.

In the first part of this article (*CineAction!* #2) I discussed some limitations of ideological criticism, citing Robin Wood's interesting use of psychoanalytic feminism. Certainly, the Marxist tradition I write within and come out of has been famous for its tendency to reduce art to the ideological text. The formal propensity to disperse the film 'experience' across commodities and media, and to organize it around 'autonomous' spectacles exacerbates one of the problems of *any* ideological criticism: it is increasingly difficult to comprehend concretely an exact ideological effect of a cultural product if its experience and form disperse, multiply and invite various kinds of self-conscious reflection and appropriation on the parts of its consumers.<sup>4</sup>

Much criticism of film's ideological construction of the subject rests on an equation of the mechanics of cultural forms with psychic economy. Not only do blockbusters make the workings of these mechanics part of the show, they seem to encapsulate the kind of social pleasure film can still produce and which a 'psychology' can only partly comprehend.

Neither spectacle nor social pleasure has an inherent politics, though it seems to me that radical criticism must have an extraordinary interest in the kinds of collectivity they reinforce and discover.<sup>5</sup> A properly Marxist concern with form would be such *because form is a category that is both social and aesthetic*. The form I have traced is the commodity circuit of the blockbuster as a particular variant of the combination of the social and the aesthetic. If we can go no further than a revulsion at the commodification of 'art,' we will argue that cultural commodities simply reenact the reification of the degraded subject, initiated in capitalist production. Against such a totalizing system, we must locate hope in *negation*, per-





Alice Krige in *Ghost Story*: normalcy's monstrous secret—the violent repression of the dangerous female . . .

haps in the universalizing refusals of Art or Philosophy. Marxist 'hope' has always, however, resided in discovering a transformative principle *within* the contradictions of the social order—ultimately in the Proletariat. Rather than negation, we should expect art to produce, in its particular sensuous form, those contradictions and conflicts of domination and liberation. For example, if we perceive ideological decipherment to be part of a Marxist criticism, the recent hit melodrama *An Officer and a Gentleman* services the perpetuation of sexual, racial and class oppression in ways that hardly need unmasking. Even in such an extreme case we should also expect a formal confluence of domination and liberation. The final scene involves Gere sweeping Winger out of her factory, up into his arms in extended slow motion. Like most sequences I've discussed, it is detachable from the film: set to the anthemic "You Lift Me Up," it functions like a video, although stylistically more reminiscent of those ecstatic advertisements of couples running

across fields. The audience is spectacularly inscribed in the scene as applauding workers, and in their passive celebration *for* the stars they are sentimentally recuperated from the revulsion which the film has previously held for them. The resolution involved needs little relation to the rather implausible narrative tensions which have set it up so that we perceive the scene as a spectacle unto itself, and, very specifically, as an abstracted 'rescue' from class conditions. Even this militarist fantasy has as its initiating kernel the most radical demand of all: an end to class oppression. As it is rendered, we experience the 'desire,' understand the transformation, as only individual, almost magical, but the dialectical tension of individual (star, star as worker, spectator) and collectivity (workers, audience) should leave a glimmer of the 'desirability' of abolishing the conditions which produce the longing whose 'fulfillment' we are cheering. Consideration of the formal moment broadens our sense of the 'pleasures' involved: the spectacle for

our collective desires is both utopian and ideological, dominating and transformative.

The Marxist critic Fredric Jameson has remarked that it may be impossible to represent advanced capitalism artistically. However, there may be a sense in which we can draw a homologous relationship between cultural product and capitalist 'reality.' The blockbuster, as I implied earlier, presents a paradigm of a magical production, a spectacle for consumption for all of us, embedded in the inter-textual circuit of parody which produces that media consciousness in which History and authority tend to disappear. But the limits of domination imply a horizon of liberation; the same spectacle, I have also argued, activates collective interpretations and pleasures, produces 'new' gratifications however commodified: at the level of the ideological, contradictions must be raised and rendered aesthetically, containing and relinquishing the possibilities of transformation.<sup>6</sup> It is, after all, only capitalism playing.



## Notes



... and the monstrous return of the repressed.

1. Television sports provide a complementary emphasis on the montage of time and space; the virtually Vertovian 'camera mischief' of replays, slow-motion, multiple angles, graphics, etc.
2. Umberto Eco, "Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage" in *Sub-Stance* #47, pp. 3-12.
3. Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of 20th Century Art Forms*, London: Methuen, 1984, defines parody, rather fancily, as "an integrated structural modelling process of revising, inverting and trans-contextualizing previous works." This could partially overlap with the generic self-consciousness of classic Hollywood and include the colloquial sense of 'making fun.' The increasing prominence of parody in film may be due to its typical operation across media culture and back through film history: generic reworking in classic Hollywood typically operates within a set of genres. At another point, parody overlaps with the related process known as pastiche. Jameson calls pastiche "parody that has lost its sense of humour." Pastiche implies an assemblage from other works that refuses synthesizing irony: presumably its interpretation owes more to the juxtaposition of collage and is less coded than the somewhat smug humor of parody. This distinction also leads us into the dense debates about modernism and post-modernism and the elaborate efforts to define, celebrate or condemn contemporary culture which I cannot summarize here. See Frederic Jameson, "Post-Modernism and Consumer Society" in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays On Post-Modern Culture*, Hal Foster (ed.), Washington: Bay Press, 1983, pp. 111-125.
4. See for instance Stuart Hall, "Culture, the Media and the 'Ideological Effect'" in *Mass Communication and Society*, Curran, Gurevitch, Wollacott (eds), London: Sage Publications, 1979.
5. Terry Lovell, *Pictures of Reality*, London: BFI, 1980, p. 95. This discussion has been within Lovell's challenge to investigate cinematic "pleasures of an essentially public and social kind."
6. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981, pp. 281-299.

(Second of two parts)



# Neglected Films of the '80s: **Foxes**

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by Bryan Bruce

**I**T IS NOT SURPRISING THAT *FOXES* (Adrian Lyne, 1980), as a vehicle for Jodie Foster, one of the most anomalous Hollywood stars to come out of the '70s, should have been neglected both commercially and critically upon its release. Foster's enigmatic debuts as tomboys (on television as the friend of Eddie Corbett/Brandon Cruz on the series *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* [1969-1972]; on the big screen as the startlingly boyish Audrey in Scorsese's *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* [1976]) and her controversial role as the child prostitute, Iris, in *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976) anticipated an emerging star persona that runs contrary to the conventional cinematic representation of the teen-age girl: she is not the expected voluptuous beauty or brat-pack princess, but the tough-talking, realistically figured young woman, both streetwise and intelligent, who has retained the masculinity that little girls are expected to relinquish at puberty, and an innocence that allows her to imagine alternatives to the narrowly defined adult world.

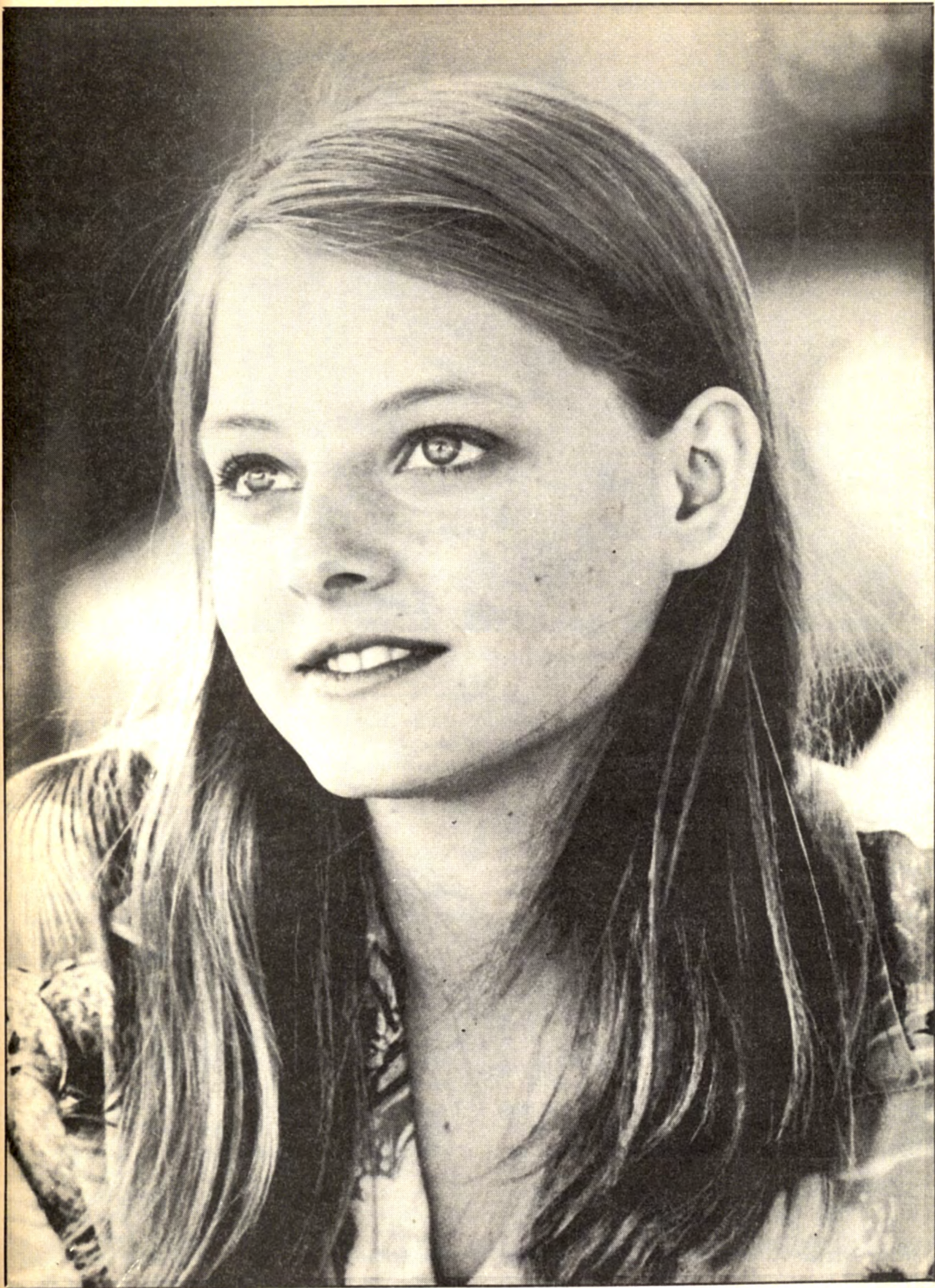
Foster's role as Jeanie in *Foxes* provides for a perfect expression of her refusal to conform. The film works to break down the artificial distinction between adult and child (here, as in Foster's Disney vehicle, *Freaky Friday*, by inverting the traditional mother/daughter relationship) and to create an environment sufficiently open to accommodate both her bisexual impulses and her seemingly contradictory drives toward complete independence and autonomy on one side and some form of communal existence on the other.

The combination of Jodie Foster's radical screen persona and various historically specific determinants may account for the general dismissal of *Foxes*. Like Dennis Hopper's *Out of the Blue*, released the previous year, it presented a dissatisfied and prematurely disillusioned girl as the main character at a time when most Hollywood films were providing an easy return to strong and unproblematic hero identification. (*Foxes* complicates identification by splitting our attention amongst Jeanie and three other equally confused girls, the camera often recording their actions from a disorientingly close proximity, as if one of them). Also like *Out of the Blue*, *Foxes* opposed the strict reinforcement of the coherent linear

classical narrative by presenting a series of loosely connected, heterogeneous sequences following the girls, some shot in a cinema verité, hand-held camera style, some more calculated and 'professional' in effect, some improvisatory, some more apparently rehearsed, etc. The distance from the film produced by this kind of narrative variance and the amount of effort required to make sense of it had become more alienating than engaging to audiences of the early eighties; in fact, much of the criticism levelled at *Foxes* made reference to its disjointed, confusing plot, its incoherence. (As I shall argue subsequently, its narrative is actually highly structured and sophisticated). Finally, *Foxes*, as a product of Casablanca Record and Filmworks, represented an attempt to exploit the already exhausted market for disco films. (Paul Bogart and Casablanca had already given us the Village People in *Can't Stop the Music* and Donna Summer in *Thank God It's Friday* featuring her hit "Last Dance," and contributed another Summer disco hit, "On the Radio," to *Foxes*, along with a soundtrack by Giorgio Moroder, who has provided disco-influenced scores for such films as *Midnight Express* [also produced by Casablanca], *American Gigolo*, and *Cat People*.) However, the marketing of the film by Casablanca, with the publicity shot of four heavily made-up girls walking together on a city street at night,\* combined with the misleading title (which must be taken ironically), gave it the reputation of a 'sexploitation' movie. (When I went to several video rental stores to find it, I was invariably asked if it was an 'adult' film, and at least one friend I mentioned it to asked if it was "that hooker movie with Jodie Foster.")

It is possible that part of the disappointment or confusion that audiences felt about *Foxes* was a result of its insistently realistic presentation of the culturally-specific problems encountered by the disco or post-disco kids, which contradicted its marketing strategy (the same formula can be applied to *Beat Street* and the rap/breakdance phenomenon). Unlike films that merely capitalize on the popularity of musical subcultures, *Beat Street*, *Out of the Blue*, and *Foxes* attempt to determine the source of these initially subversive youth movements (which eventually lose radical impetus through their appropriation by the media and conventionalized, popular music and art forms), present-









**Deirdre (Kandice Strohm), Madge (Marilyn Kagan), Annie (Cherie Currie), and Jeanie (Jodie Foster): female solidarity.**

ing the problems of children in the context of the disintegrating nuclear family and the institutionalized authority of school-teachers and principals, psychiatrists, and police.

In *Foxes*, it is the project of the four girls to escape from their oppressive family situations to form a different kind of communal environment based on mutual support and the solution of shared problems and conflicts. Jeanie lives with her divorced mother (Sally Kellerman) who has gone back to college to get her degree, and in so doing, is re-experiencing all the insecurities and doubts of a young student ("I'm a forty-year-old woman and I'm sitting here reading Plato again. It's insane.") Jeanie is more emotionally mature, independent, and sensible (she ends her three year relationship with her boyfriend while her mother starts to sleep with a man she hardly knows and who, Jeanie points out with disgust, wears white shoes), and has the ability to see through the false image of adult authority at high school—when a family planning teacher chides her for holding her baby upside down, Jeanie has to remind her that it's only a rubber doll.

The latter incident is only one example of the way the film sets up the adult world as one concerned with illusion and superficial reality, and the perpetuation of form over substance at all costs—the inability to recognize ideology as a self-effacing, artificial construct which

can be changed. This is presented through the use of language, the distinction between the fixed symbolic order of the parent against the open, imaginary world of the child. Jeanie's mother is obsessed with the details of words and expressions rather than the true meaning or feeling behind them. When the girls are taken to the police station after unsuccessfully containing a party that turned into a brawl beyond their control, she believes the hyperbolic words the police use to describe the behavior of the girls—drunkenness, narcotics, destruction of property—formulaic words which are used to generalize and explain away the disturbing actions of youths rather than to understand them. Jeanie can only say, "Mom, they're cops"; she is unable to verbalize the oppressive strategy of the authorities and their ability to manipulate language.

The fight between mother and daughter that follows the disastrous party is based on the politics of language. Her mother chastises Jeanie for using slang (" 'Yeah'—whatever happened to the word 'yes'?"), refusing to recognize it as a rebellion against the rigid formality of adult-speak. When Jeanie says that her best friend Annie might commit suicide, her mother asks, "Did she actually say the *word* suicide?," to which Jeanie responds, "No, but I know what she feels." This is precisely the difference between children and parents that the film repeatedly returns to—the loss of feeling



and sensitivity that is somehow a prerequisite for the entry to adulthood.

Annie (played by Cherie Currie of the '70s 'Hollywood Rock' all-girl band the Runaways with Joan Jett) is signified as the essence of feeling and passion in the film—she is the wild free spirit, an ex-hooker at 15 who is constantly searching for the immediate sensual gratification provided by sex and drugs and alcohol. Unlike Deirdre, the other 'bad girl' of the foursome who plays the role of the grown-up femme fatale, Annie remains the impulsive, pleasure-seeking child who refuses the discipline of parents and school. Her father, a brutal policeman who beats her for her transgressions, becomes all fathers and every cop to her (whenever she sees a police car she runs, thinking it's he); the adult world in her eyes is one single, ubiquitous patriarch trying to take away her freedom.

Between the confusion in adult role-playing of the teen-agers and the childish behavior of the parents is Jodie Foster as Jeanie. She is the most balanced and genuine character in the film, who seems like an adult but is not repressed, who experimented with sex at an early age because "it was the fun thing to do," but drops her boyfriend because he is caught up in the Hollywood material world of vans and blow-dryers, who is fascinated by and in love with the disorder of the sensual

wild-child, Annie, but, like Iris in *Taxi Driver*, craves a communal order to organize her revolutionary sensibility.

Jeanie's presence as the rational youth links together sequences in a highly structured narrative which creates the impression of disorder. The film can be broken down into five segments, each episodic and symmetrical (both in itself and in relation to the other segments), and each shaped in some sense by Jeanie's point of view. The first segment, covering roughly the first half of the film, follows Jeanie's adventures during a single day. The opening credit sequence has the camera tracking slowly across her sleeping figure and surveying the contents of her room (a conventional Hollywood technique to reveal character often used during credit sequences), including her three best girlfriends. The girls wake up together and prepare for school, but their departure is violently interrupted by the attack of a cop (who, we discover, is Annie's father), separating Annie from her friends. Jeanie is shown at school (the rubber doll incident) and afterwards searching for Annie with Deirdre and Madge. After they rescue her from a violent incident on the sleazy Hollywood Boulevard, the four girls, reunited, go shopping and then prepare for the Angel rock concert. After the concert Jeanie drives Madge home to prepare for a party that never takes place



Jeanie (Jodie Foster) reads Plato to her mother (Sally Kellerman) in bed.



(answered oppositely in the second half of the film by the party out of bounds), and then returns to her own house, ending the day in bed reading Plato to her mother, who has forgotten to get a new prescription for her glasses. Jeanie is the character who connects each sequence, and it is her consciousness which the film begins to project.

The second segment begins with Madge, the plump, bespectacled, intelligent virgin who reverses expectation when we discover she is seeing an older man, Jay/Randy Quaid. After insisting that she and Jay consummate their relationship, another departure from convention, Madge, sitting on Jay's bed, calls Jeanie, who is sleeping in her bed with Annie, to tell her the news of the loss of her virginity. After hanging up, Jeanie tells Annie she is depressed that one of her best friends could sleep with a guy once and want to marry him, and the scene ends with the two girls embracing in a romantic two-shot that makes them appear as twins. Although there is no explicit suggestion of sex, the symmetrical placement of the beds of the two couples and the embrace of solidarity between the two girls connotes an open sexuality consistent with both Jeanie's ideal of communal love and Jodie Foster's bisexual screen image (the scene is remarkably similar in tone and mood to the provocative, gauzy love scene between Foster and Nastassja Kinski in the otherwise uninteresting *The Hotel New Hampshire*).

The third segment begins again with the four girls together preparing for the party at Jay's house (he is away on business) which results in disaster and destruction, and ends, once more, with Jeanie and her mother, at home after the police station, this time fighting bitterly. Here the confusion between parents and children becomes explicit. Jeanie's mother expresses her fear of the girls; she says, "You look like kids but you don't act like them. You're short forty-year-olds and you're tough ones," and finally yells, "You're too beautiful, all of you. You make me hate my hips. I hate my hips." Jeanie has become in her mother's eyes a mature woman while she herself regresses to insecurities and temper tantrums. The scene ends with another reversal, the mother running away from home, and the daughter ready to have her friends move in to her house to form an ideal, egalitarian 'family.'

The fourth segment begins, like the third, with Jay and Madge (after we follow Jeanie to Jay's house—she invariably leads the thread of the narrative), who fight over the ruins of his home, Madge as the mature, responsible child, Jay as the spoiled, ill-tempered adult. The rest of the segment is devoted to Jeanie's melancholy over Annie's admittance to the psychiatric hospital and her attempt to rescue her after she escapes. She and Brad/Scott Baio, both in love with Annie, spend the day together because they miss her, and are finally interrupted by a distress call from her. After they save and lose her again, Annie is picked up on the freeway by a corrupt, drunken Hollywood couple, the most extreme instance of puerile adulthood in the film; they make sexual advances toward her, and, distracted, crash

into a truck. The segment ends with the girls reunited for the last time at the hospital as Annie dies.

The fifth segment begins with Deirdre and Jeanie in close-up at a solemn ceremony which, in juxtaposition with the previous scene, appears to be Annie's funeral. The camera pulls back to reveal that it is actually the wedding of Madge and Jay, an event which, for Jeanie, represents, in a sense, the death of another friend; her dream of an all-girl commune is gone forever. After reaching a truce with her mother, Jeanie takes the flowers from the wedding to Annie's grave. The camera zooms in slowly to a close-up of her face as she tells in voice-over of Annie's wish to be buried under a pear tree with the roots growing through her body so that her friends could pick a pear and say, "Annie's tasting good this year," ending, by implication, with Jeanie's love for Annie and the hopeful perpetuation of her free and sensual nature.

Clearly, *Foxes* has a carefully crafted, traditional narrative based on symmetrical construction, standardized linking devices, and the over-determination of thematic lines. This, however, is mediated both by its formal idiosyncrasies (the preference for the hand-held camera and telephoto street shots; the abrupt transitions between and within certain segments; the consistently dark and foggy cinematography not conventionally associated with a 'teen' movie), and by its obsessive inversion of the expected representation of parents and teen-agers, boys and girls, the masculine and the feminine—the debunking of cinematic stereotypes. Whether neglected as a result of a specific audience unreceptive to eccentric or disturbing movies, or because of poor marketing or bad reputation, and despite director Adrian Lyne's subsequent effort, *Flashdance*, which reinstitutes many of the formal and thematic conventions his first film disrupts, *Foxes* remains an exciting film, and demonstrates that Jodie Foster is by far the most interesting of the young Hollywood stars.

## Notes

\* It is worth noting that the context from which this still has been extracted undermines the potentially exploitative image it carries by itself. Within the diegesis, the four girls, walking to a rock concert, are assailed by catcalls and propositions from several teen-age boys. When the girls express no interest and continue with their arms around one another, the boys accuse them of being 'dykes.' Their response is to stop in unison and hug and kiss each other in mock ecstasy, bend over and wiggle their asses at the open-mouthed boys. This incident suggests that the girls (and the film) are conscious of the radical nature of their project of female solidarity, and are not afraid to express it openly.



# B O O K S

## A Brief Critique of Pop Criticism

*Midnight Matinees*

by Jay Scott

Oxford University Press, 1985



It is difficult to get an ideological handle on Jay Scott's *Midnight Matinees*, couched, as it is, in the gimmicks and gambols of film review journalese, and neutralized by the hypothetical objectivity and distance from ideology that journalists are supposed to have automatic access to. Scott skirts the espousal of any overt political or aesthetic project by lodging himself somewhere between the glib and bitchy solipsism of Pauline Kael and the humanist populism of James Agee, a critical style dictated by the commercial nature of the particular widely-distributed newspaper or magazine for which the critic writes.

In order to be marketable, a popular critic must conform

to specific criteria which amount to a complicity with the film industry to advertise and promote its product, either by praising it and congratulating those responsible for it, or by criticizing it in such a way as to create controversy around it, or to make it into a spectacle. (There are, of course, exceptions: the concerted critical attack on Cimino's *Heaven's Gate*, for example, emerged as a conspiracy to kill the film as some kind of punishment directed towards the notoriously difficult director. The critics in this case, although not serving the interests of the film, were still acting on behalf of 'the industry.')

In his introduction Scott provides excuses for these restrictions, allowing that "... newspapers and magazines impose constraints that demand the drastic compression of reality as the writer perceives it" (p. 3) ("compression" connoting quantitative rather than qualitative limitations). However, he goes on to say that the *Globe and Mail*, the paper for which he writes, gives him "... more freedom than most reporters believe possible ..." (p. 3), and then attempts to justify the reproduction in book format of his daily critiques. His apologia makes no sense; his writing style and its project are directly attributable to the disposable nature of the daily news, and should not be separated from that context.

Scott's book is divided into two sections, the first half composed of longer essays on various "factories" within the movie industry (an analogy that is never adequately articulated), the second, of short, pithy reviews of individual films, alphabetically arranged. The longer pieces exhibit all the conventions of popular film journalism: the bad punning and sarcasm (typical, for example, of the *Village Voice*); the catchy gimmick (writing in the vernacular, the travelogue, the behind-the-scenes look); the virtuosic word-play borrowed from literature to make criticism more palatable. These devices are designed both to set up the critic as the familiar and immutable voice of authority (if it's in the newspaper, it must be true) without sacrificing entertainment value (it appears in the entertainment section), and to build up for the critic an engaging persona which readers can comfortably identify with, feeding into the favored construction by the media of the cult of the personality (critic as star).

Scott's largely ironic critical devices are used redundantly in the sections on the Cannes Film Festival and the making of *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, events which are so absurd as to parody themselves without the need of pointed critical intervention. The most interesting and valuable section is the more straightforward account of the Canadian Film Industry, before, during, and after the tax-shelter years, a sober historical analysis of a stifled cultural/art establishment and its product. The least satisfactory section is his guarded defense of Paul Schrader's *Mishima*, typical of the attempt by popular critics to conceal their politics in order not to offend or appear biased, a position which necessitates an adherence to universalized and unquestionable political and aesthetic models. After alluding to the director's fascist and homophobic tendencies, Scott offers the following: "This can be said of Schrader's *Mishima*: it is innovative, it is beautiful, it is respectful of the man whose story it tells, and it is true to one defensible interpretation of it" (p. 11). The defense is a familiar one for popular reviewers: technical virtuosity and innovation over-rule considerations of content; beauty, as an objectively defined, eternal category, transcends any banal social or political reality; truth and respect, as hu-



manist qualities abstracted from their specific application, outweigh the unworthiness of their object. In effect, Scott's treatment of Schrader mirrors the latter's proposition of the transcendence of art, a position which ridicules any personal or political objection to it by placing art in a classical or mystical realm beyond ideology. This position also accounts for the popular film critic's ability to embrace simultaneously the right and the left (or, at least, the liberal reformist left), as in Scott's chameleon-like appropriation (both in political orientation and affectation of style) of Tom Wolfe's critique of the American New Right in *The Right Stuff*.

The individual film reviews in the second half of *Midnight Matinees* conform more obviously to the devices of pop criticism. Most of the reviews are remarkably homogeneous and formulaic—plot summaries, literary impressions of the film (Scott has a preference for metaphorical description that redundantly reiterates the filmic image), and the final one-liner that reductively sums up everything with a parting punch. This formula has in common with the rest of the news the commodification of information in order to make it more easily digestible—world events and art as entertainment and diversion. Taking a specific instance, Scott's review of *The Lonely Lady*, in its intentional reductivism, parodies his own style. It consists of a one paragraph plot summary and a concluding zinger, an account of the film that only piques our interest (can it be as bad as he suggests?) and reduces the function of criticism to poking fun.

In keeping with the pop reviewer's tendency to transmit passively the prevailing ideological climate, Scott's criticism makes room for a certain liberal feminism, one which enables him to review with equal favor Von Trotta's *Marianne and Juliane* and Levinson's *Diner*, the former taking feminist issues perhaps as far as mainstream cinema permits, the latter exemplifying the blatant misogyny and unabashed male-centredness of much of the New Hollywood. Scott's feminism still allows him to characterize female stars as "delectable" (Renee Soutendijk in *The Fourth Man*), or maintain that they have been justifiably exploited for their looks (Daryl Hannah in *The Pope of Greenwich Village*), and to ignore almost completely the feminist potential engaged by the screen persona of Diane Keaton (*Reds*, *Mrs. Soffel*).

*Midnight Matinees*, if typical of popular film criticism, is certainly not its worst example; there are intelligent insights and engaging stories about the film industry which pay tribute to Jay Scott as the most interesting of the Toronto newspaper film critics (Ron Base, George Anthony, John Harkness). But in the end, and particularly with the film reviews, the book retains the most basic characteristic of the daily review—that of flagrant disposability.

**Bryan Bruce**

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Meryl Streep and Robert DeNiro in *The Deer Hunter*.

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Back cover: Judy Garland in *A Star Is Born*.





Robin Wood on	<b>I Walked With A Zombie</b>
Florence Jacobowitz on	<b>Feminist Film Theory</b>
Varda Burstyn on	<b>Cries and Whispers</b>
Richard Lippe on	<b>A Star Is Born</b>
Lori Spring on	<b>The Year of Living Dangerously</b>
Andrew Britton on	<b>Spellbound</b>
Janine Marchessault on	<b>Celine and Julie Go Boating</b>
Scott Forsyth on	<b>Form in Popular Film</b>
Bryan Bruce on	<b>Foxes</b>